

## **FIRST LADY AS DIPLOMATIC AGENT: ANALYZING MICHELLE OBAMA'S CONTRIBUTION IN "LET GIRLS LEARN!" INITIATIVE**

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### **ABSTRAK**

Dalam era modern, diplomasi publik telah menjadi salah satu metode politik yang sering digunakan dalam membangun relasi antar negara, dan dikarenakan perubahan dalam peran wanita di abad ke-20, Ibu Negara dari Amerika Serikat atau juga bisa disebut sebagai FLOTUS juga telah menjadi salah satu aset diplomatik negara. Selama ia menjabat, Michelle Obama telah vokal mengenai advokasi kesetaraan gender di bidang pendidikan dan tempat kerja. Dalam kasus ini, sebagai Ibu Negara, ia ditugaskan untuk mengangkat isu tersebut dengan meningkatkan kesadaran masyarakat global. Dan untuk melakukan itu, dia menggunakan taktik retorik dan komunikasi interpersonal untuk membujuk masyarakat dan mengungkapkan tujuan untuk negara-negara lain untuk bergabung dengan inisiatif ini. Dengan menggunakan metode riset kualitatif dan teori "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power" oleh Joseph S. Nye, Jr dan teori komunikasi interpersonal "Goal-Plan-Action" oleh James Price Dilliard, jurnal artikel ini menemukan bagaimana Michelle Obama meningkatkan kesadaran masyarakat domestic dan global, serta membujuk para pemimpin dunia, pejabat negara, dan diplomat untuk berpartisipasi dalam inisiatif "Let Girls Learn!" dengan menggunakan pendekatan komunikasi interpersonal sebagai usahanya dalam mempromosikan inisiatif tersebut.

Kata Kunci: Diplomasi publik, Ibu Negara, Michelle Obama, Peluang Pendidikan yang setara, Komunikasi interpersonal

### **ABSTRACT**

*In the modern era, public diplomacy has become one of the most used political methods in building relationships between countries, and due to the changing role of women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The First Lady of the United States or can be called as FLOTUS has also become one of the state's diplomatic assets. During her tenure, Michelle Obama has been vocal about advocating gender equality in the field of education and working place. In this case, as the FLOTUS, she was assigned to address the gender inequality issue by raising the awareness of the global audiences. And to do that, she was employing a rhetorical tactic of personal diplomacy in order to persuade the audience and express the means for other states to join the initiative. By using qualitative research method and utilizing the "Public Diplomacy and*

*Soft Power” theory by Joseph S. Nye, Jr and interpersonal communication “Goal-Plan-Action” theory by James Price Dilliard, this journal article discover how Michelle Obama raise the domestic and global audience, as well as persuading the world leaders, government officials, and diplomats to participate in the “Let Girls Learn!” initiative by utilizing interpersonal communication approach in her effort of promoting the initiative.*

*Keywords: Public diplomacy, First Lady, Michelle Obama, Equal education opportunity, Interpersonal Communication.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the modern era, public diplomacy is one of the most used political methods as relationship management. As one of the countries which has the most influence on many other countries, the United States has done lots of practice of public diplomacy, widely known with their cultural diplomacy, economic diplomacy, and gastronomy diplomacy. However, unwittingly the spouse of the President of The United States or the First Lady of the United States or can be shortened as FLOTUS, has become one of the important diplomatic assets of the United States. During Michelle Obama’s tenure, a large number of commentaries that related with the First Lady have been portraying her as an important political presence for women, African-American, and also African-American women. In this matter, the author would like to analyze Michelle Obama as the First Lady and how she contributes as an agent of the United States public diplomacy.

In international relations, the term “public diplomacy” itself has been described as an aspect of international relations that manifests itself outside the interaction between state structures (Elena Gurgu, 2000). In influencing the foreign government and public, intervention of influential figures is needed due to the fact that publics are more willingly to follow these influential figures on social media platforms and to engage in face to face interactions (Tam, 2019).

During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, American women were outcast in the political realm, women were not allowed to participate in the activities such as voting, serving on juries, and holding elective office. Women was also become the subject of discrimination that sees them as second class citizen, and being divided by race, class, religion, ethnicity, and region makes women have lack the sense of solidarity. In 1900, women’s legal stands were regulated by their marriage, due to this fact, a married woman shared and followed the identity of her husband (The Wilder Lehrman Institute of American History, 2019).

This situation also led to the underlying ideology that defines women's place in society that confines women to household activity only, which restricts their responsibility to raising sons and dutiful daughters. However, with the improvement of women's education and women's shifting into a wider variety of reformation activity and professions has set the base for the surging movement that addresses the issue of women's basic citizenship right. The citizenship rights claim was asserting the women's rights to join the civilian life as individuals, compared to being presented under their husbands' or fathers' identity. In 1910's, the goals of the movement were also participated by working-class and African-American women with their own political agendas which was linked with the struggles of the working class and the discrimination that was faced by them (The Wilder Lehrman Institute of American History, 2019).

By the time World War II was occurring, it stimulated another surging wave of women's activism. During World War II, women were joining the labor force in massive numbers, and in 1950 it has become a norm for married women or women above thirty-five years old to join the labor force, in the aftermath, reasserting the traditional gender roles. To combat this, another surging wave of women activism among different women's constituencies, women were quickly shift their patterns of labor-force and civic participation, then initiate social movements for civil rights and world peace, and later on brought their activism into higher education institutions (The Wilder Lehrman Institute of American History, 2019). And due to the changing role of women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there are new possibilities that are provided for the first ladies to approach their role as political figures (Michalská, 2018).

As an influential country, the United States has practiced large numbers of public diplomacy. In his research, Thomas Veldkamp stated that the spouses of diplomats have played a role that has extended beyond their responsibilities as wife towards their husbands. He stated that the spouses of diplomats do play an important role in international relations and the practice of diplomacy itself (Veldkamp, 2015).

Based on the publication that was posted on the White House Office of the Press Secretary official webpage, the Obama Administration's effort in pursuing improvement on girls' education includes approximately over \$1 billion worth of investment in the recent and on-going programing by the U.S. Government. President Obama believes that when the girls are educated, the communities are well equipped in facing adversity and able to survive

throughout crises and make investments in the future. The initiative itself has also managed to utilize the resources across the U.S. government that leads to coordinated, effective and sustainable investments in the education of adolescent girls all across the globe (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2016).

In the United States' "Let Girls Learn!" initiative approach, the initiative itself is focused on developing programs and policies that specifically develop young women's education all across the globe, the scope of the issue that was addressed that was employed by the initiative also includes the health & economic issues, and societal barriers that has become the obstacles that girls need to face in order to attain a quality education (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2016).

The common theme throughout Michelle Obama's tenure as the FLOTUS has described her as an important symbol of American politics due to the fact that her presence holds a meaning for women, African Americans, and/or African American women (Badas, 2019). It is worth mentioning that many Americans express their goodwill towards Mrs. Obama due to the fact that she is capable of maintaining a high favorable evaluation throughout her term. During her tenure from 2013 until 2017, she attracted all the girls all around the world through her effort on advocating the "Let Girls Learn!" initiative (2015-2016) which advocates girls to pursue their education (The White House President Barack Obama, N/A).

In the event of "Let Girls Learn!", Michelle Obama was taking trips to Liberia, Morocco, and Madrid where she speaks not only to the nation's government, but also to its public. The visited location was the local school and Peace Corp training facility in Liberia. She also held a meeting that was moderated by CNN Journalist Isha Sesay in order to discuss the quality education for young girls and women and to announce a \$100 million aid package for Morocco (Guerraoui, 2016). And in her final lap of the trip, she delivers her discourse to young girls and women that highlights the goals of the new program. The trip itself is documented in her social media page under #LetGirlsLearn and #62MillionGirls, and also in her daily trips entries on the website Hello Giggles (Jones, 2016).

The program itself provides a long-term, sustainable development that enables women to enjoy equal opportunity to access quality education that has been shown to create pathways for greater economic growth, improved health outcomes, sustained democratic governance,

and more peaceful and resilient societies (USAID , 2018). Therefore, this initiative creates the means for other countries or foreign public to interact or build relations with the United States.

Unlike the President or the other diplomatic officials, the First Lady did not have any guideline, regulation, or policy that they needed to follow or fulfill. However, due to their celebrity-like status that comes when they are married to the head of states, it provides them the ability to become a political figure and as a diplomatic asset. In this case is Michelle Obama during her second period as the FLOTUS in 2013 until 2017.

As the FLOTUS, Michelle Obama has been vocal about advocating equal education chances for girls. As from the statement that she wrote and posted on The Atlantic's website on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015, she viewed the "Let Girls Learn!" initiative was a crucial investment in order to improve the quality of young girls and women globally.

And in this case, the First Lady Michelle Obama has become the diplomatic agent for the United States and was not only assigned to envoy diplomacy with the world leaders, government officials, and diplomats. She was also assigned to raise awareness on the issue, and unite stakeholders from various sectors.

The question that this journal tries to answer is "How does Michelle Obama's "Let Girls Learn!" advocacy during 2015-2016 contribute to the United States public diplomacy?". And the objective that this research tries to aim is to discuss how Michelle Obama as the FLOTUS contributes to the public diplomacy of the United States through her advocacy on girls' education in "Let Girls Learn!" initiative.

The author's purpose on writing the journal article is to brought the attention and broaden the perspective to the possibility of the First Lady to become a diplomatic agent, due to the fact that the amount of the influence that the First Lady potentially have that could be utilized to influence the public and the possibility of the First Lady to become the state's representative.

## **ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

By the definition that has been coined by Joseph S. Nye, Jr in his book "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power" (1990, 2002). "Power is the ability to affect the other to obtain the outcomes that you want.". The ability to set preferences is frequently associated with intangible assets, such as; attractive personality, culture, political value, and institution.

In liberalism of public diplomacy, it defines the role of public diplomacy is to create attraction for a country's culture, ideals, and policies to build an enabling environment for national interests. From a liberalist perspective, a state is not seen as the most important actor in world politics. However, it considers the state as one important actor among many, though its presence and behavior had declined in influence. Liberalists viewed that it is a great necessity to obtain a complex communication with citizens and other non-state global entities in order to maintain their own national security (Seong-Hun Yun, 2009).

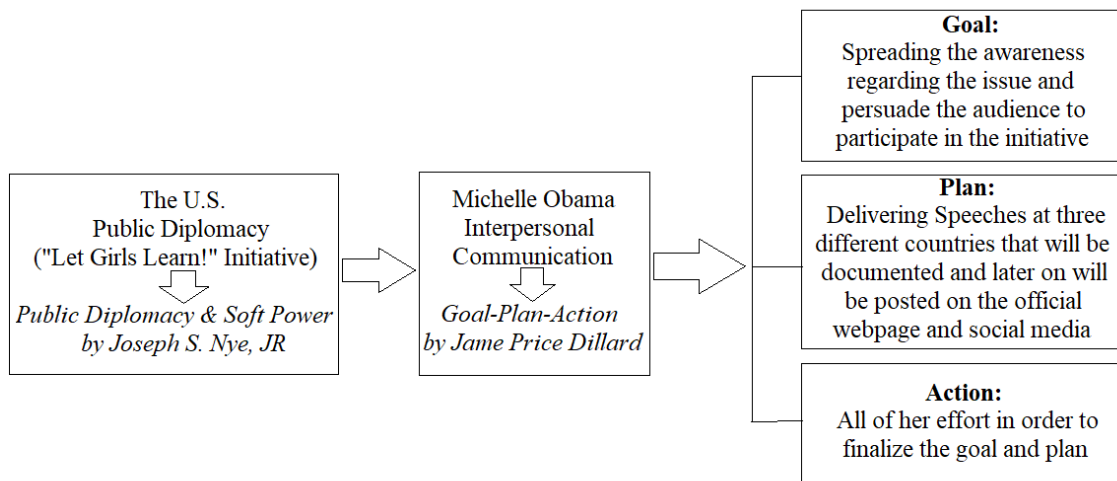
The act of delivering messages and influence itself had already been studied in the late mid 1070's, based on the general consensus, communication happens in four levels which are intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, and macrosocial (Vladimir Naimovski, 2016). In this particular issue the communication happens at interpersonal level, because interpersonal communication is focused on narrowed and fixed between two person or frame of a very small group, this approach of communication is considered to be effective when used to achieve the desired reaction and respond to the recipient (Vladimir Naimovski, 2016). To further analyze the interpersonal communication level that is occurring in this case, the Goal-Plans-Action (GPA) theory of messages by James Price Dilliard in 1990 will help to understand the process of the interaction. The theory embraces the idea that there are knowable and objective patterns in the world, this theory assumes that individuals make choices based on the messages that they create and do with a certain level of awareness, this theory also views communication as an "interactive process" where the actor matches their message nature to the receiving end.

In the GPA theory, there are three steps sequence in the messages engagement which is "Goal" that could be defined as the future states of individuals tries to achieve, "Plans" which is motivated by the attempt of achieving "Goal", and "Actions" that are the final product of the efforts of the people in to realize a goal (Dillard, 2015).

There are two types of goals that consist in this theory. First, is the influence goal which is the primary goal, it was described as "states of affairs that individuals try to attain through talk" and it also include a desire to maintain the states of the current affairs, it means that the main reasons to engage into a conversation which is to affect/influence the other's opinion. And the secondary goal is maintaining and shaping the relationship between the individuals that were engaged in the interaction(Carma L. Bylund, 2011).

As the second sequence of the GPA theory, plans represent both verbal and non-verbal actions that were engaged in order to influence/affect the other’s opinion. After both primary and secondary goals are considered, the initiator will attain numbers of engagement plans that would help the initiator to achieve the goals of the interaction (Carma L. Bylund, 2011).

Figure 1: The Author's Analytical Framework



In the light of understanding and examining Michelle Obama’s “Let Girls Learn!” advocacy, the author utilized Joseph S. Nye Jr’s “Soft Power and Public Diplomacy”. This theory defines that public diplomacy is the ability to affect the other to obtain the outcomes one wants through attractions rather than coercion or payment, it is more than persuasion or move people by argument, it’s also able to entice and attract (Nye, 2008). This theory seems fitting due to the fact that Michelle Obama’s advocate the “Let Girls Learn!” initiative as a beneficial initiative for counterpart countries, because this program provides the opportunity to increase women’s productivity at home which could increase family health, child survival, and investment in children’s human capital. Therefore, create a meaning for the counterpart countries to take parts in the initiative (Hill, 1995).

She also demonstrates how, as the United States’ public diplomacy agent exerts her influence and attracts the foreign audiences. During her trip in Liberia, she manages to communicate with the adolescent girls who are encountering barriers that prevent them from attaining the proper education. As to what has been reported by KNOEMA World Data Atlas, the illiterate female rate reached 60.6% in 2015 and has fluctuated substantially in recent years (KNOEMA, 2015). Also, during her next trip to Morocco where she had a discourse with the

young girls discussing the education quality and challenge that they received in the region (Jones, 2016).

In assessing how Michelle Obama was able to contribute to the public diplomacy of the country that she represents, the author chose to utilize James Price Dillard's Goals-Plan-Action approach of interpersonal communication theory. This theory helps to conceptualize and explain the process behind the messages that were intended to influence the others. This theory focused on three components, which is; goals or the outcome, plan which determine the route to reach the goals, and actions (Carma L. Bylund, 2011).

It can be used since Michelle Obama's effort in promoting the initiative and raising awareness regarding the issue of adolescent girls' education, she use common structure and rhetoric tactic such as using her own and other girls personal narrative, and explain that unequal education for girls is a form of injustice that would give impact toward all genders, and it is necessary for nations to emphasize on the importance of equal education for girls. She manages to portray and narrate herself as fellow girls that have to overcome gender barriers in order to pursue her goal through education (Bauer, 2016).

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research utilizes comprehensive literature review in order to describe an occurring phenomenon orderly and objectively, and also utilizes qualitative methods in order to analyze data from different types of literature sources that range from journal, dissertation, thesis, and other online sources. This journal also took descriptive analysis in order to generate simple summaries from various literature sources.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Flotus**

First Lady is an unofficial title that are bestowed upon the spouse of the United States' President, the first ladies themselves are not mentioned in the Constitution and didn't given the salaries despite the full-time work that is required, the title itself is a symbol of American womanhood that have been standardized by the national and then by the global stage (Anthony, 2008).



Being the spouse of the head of state is not an easy job and has a lot of its own ambiguities, the spouse of diplomats across the world has their own difficulties in defining their own role due to its extended responsibilities from the traditional housewife role (Veldkamp, 2015). Unlike the President, the First Lady doesn't have any specific assignment or policy that regulates their position, they also aren't appointed or selected to the position. Thus, creating mixed opinion among their own public and press (Michalská, 2018).

The term "First Lady" was first coined in March 31th 1860 on Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper in reference to Harriet Lane, who was tasked to the position for her uncle, President James Buchanan (Anthony, 2008). The term "First Lady" itself has been regarded as an "Unknown Institution" of the White House, the term itself has also been ignored by scholars and politicians, and also overlooked by political scientists (Loizeau, 2015). Considering that the First Ladyship could not be separated from the Presidency itself, it is not surprising that they also share some of the roles. However, the First Lady could face criticism being overly active in politics. Thus, creating a dilemma in defining their role (Jee Yun, 2014).

The earliest political practices of the First Lady were centered in the parlors or drawing rooms and the dining area, which was the political area where the first couple entertained government officials and their spouses. From the beginning, the first ladies performed their role in political context, but depth of certain first ladies' political aptitude and engagement are evidenced in their political discourse (Shawn J. Parry-Giles, 2002).

The surfacing public's interest in the First Ladies activities that shifted from the hostesses and ceremonial to a more political role could be traced back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Mary Lincoln was the subject of extensive newspaper analysis weeks prior her husband's inauguration, correspondents covered her throughout the Civil War and she received more press attention than all her successors combined. The coverage itself includes every work that she has done (Anthony, 2008).

Due to the changing role of women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there are new possibilities that are provided for the first ladies to approach their role as political figures (Michalská, 2018). However, the contribution of the first ladies is conditioned by many factors on various levels, such as; personal, institutional, societal, and public policy level (Glenn P. Hastedt, N/A).

Due to the personification framing that was directed toward the First Lady, the First Lady became the representation of women's public and political roles at various points in the

U.S. history, that later on construct the boundaries of the empowerment that helps women's public and private political influence (Burns, 2004). One of the most prominent case examples is by Michelle Obama, on 12<sup>th</sup> of February 2018, the National Portrait unveiled the official portrait of Barack and Michelle Obama, that event provided the opportunity to reflect on the historical nature of Obama's tenure and what it meant for the American Public. In this event, Michelle Obama pointed out the symbolism of her presence for young African-American women (Badas, 2019).

Due to their marriage with the chief executive, first ladies are placed in a political environment, which gives them a certain level of authority, their influence on the President comes naturally from their marriage and private life. And by virtue, the political wives had less restrictions which advantage them in engaging in a variety of activities and discussion concerning politics (Michalská, 2018).

Modern First Lady is operating within a complex political environment that could affect their influence and activism. One of the earliest examples of modern First Lady was Mrs. Clinton, who engaged in extensive contact with legislators and formed an alliance both inside and outside Washington with groups such as Vital Voice and the Children's Defense Fund (Glenn P. Hastedt, N/A).

### **The United States' "Let Girls Learn!" Initiative as A Form of Public Diplomacy**

Before "Let Girls Learn!" initiative was launched, there was an existing global effort in pursuing gender equal education opportunity in primary school and in secondary school, United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has reported that there are about 62 million of young girls that are unable to continue their education (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2016).

Based on The White House Office of the Press Secretary (2016), The "Let Girls Learn!" initiative itself is concentrating in developing program and policies that specifically combating the issue by enhancing the adolescent girls' education around the globe. The initiative creates a bridge for the U.S. Government to collaborate with state actors such as foreign governments and non-state actors that includes multilateral organizations, private sector, and civil society in order to fulfill the needs of adolescent girls. The initiative also involves six U.S. Government Agencies in designing the program itself, namely; President's Emergency Fund for AIDS Relief

(REPFAR), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Peace Corps, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), the Department of Labor (DOL), and the Department Agriculture (USDA).

The program "Let Girls Learn!", inaugurated on March, 2015 launched by First Lady of The United States, Michelle Obama and standing beside her is President of The United States, Barack Obama. The President of the United States also stated on his speech by saying,

*"..and I'm proud to say that the United States already does a great deal to support girls' education around the world.. but we do, we tend to do quietly, it doesn't get a lot of publicity.. what we determined, she determined.. we've got to take this work to next level, and tie all our different programs together in a single, coordinated strategy and that's what this initiative is about.. "* (The Obama White House, 2015).

In the end of President speech, the "Let girls learn!" initiative becomes a priority for The United States foreign policy (The Obama White House, 2015). It is clear, the "Let Girls Learn!" is actually fully supported by the Government and eventually mobilized by the First Lady, Michelle Obama in order to promote education for women around the countries.

Moreover, according to the White House Office of the Press Secretary (2016), In employing the initiative, there are four strategic approaches to achieve progress on the program, which are; the U.S. Government Agencies coordinated action approach, diplomacy approach, raising awareness approach, and partnership approach. As part of the Government coordinated action, the state Department has led the coordinated action in addressing the issue by investing more than \$10 Million in the form of programs that are focused on adolescent girls in more than 16 countries. Followed by REPFAR that has become a major partner of the initiative since its launch, by investing over \$85 million through the DREAMS (Determined, Resilient, Empowered, Aids-free. Mentored, and Safe) partnership, and DREAMS innovation challenge that focused on helping adolescent girls transiting and to remain in secondary school across 10 different countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Since the initiative was launched, USAID has invested over \$600 million through their both new and on-going efforts in 13 different countries across The Middle East, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Through the initiative, The Peace Corps has been able to train approximately more than 2,800 volunteers that will create the environment that is needed in order for the girls to advance. As per September 2016, Peace Corps Volunteers and community leaders have

spent more than \$918,00 from the Peace Corps' Let Girls Learn Fund to execute more than 300 community projects and local goods contributions worth \$620,000. With this number of community investment, the initiative project has reached more than 152,000 girls with ages ranging from 24 years old and under.

To fulfil the educational necessities of approximately 100,000 students that include around 50,000 adolescent girls and improving women's participation in Morocco's workforce, MCC launched a nearly \$100 million investment. Through the Department of Labor that on-going program effort in Ethiopia, Morocco, and Paraguay that against the child labor by educating adolescent girls. As of 2016, the DOL expand its reach by conducting cooperative agreement to reduce child labor among the adolescent girls that range the age of 15-17 in rural Zambia. As for the USDA, they have succeeded in handling the hunger issue and promoting girls' education through their school feeding assistance program worldwide. Lastly, on the building of a recent award to the World Food Program in Malawi, with the partnership between USDA and USAID, they're able to contribute an additional \$7 million that will help to maintain the girls in school and improve their education environment by providing scholarship, better classroom construction, and providing school lunch. By coordinating with each other, the mentioned U.S. Government agencies will continue to make sure that the "Let Girls Learn!" program to be impactful, measurable, evidence-based, and coordinated (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2016).

In terms of diplomacy, the initiative itself pushes the value of adolescent girls' education improvement and empowerment through bilateral and multilateral cooperation, and also regional engagement. In this approach, Michelle Obama is taking her role as the diplomatic agent. In her effort to advocating the issue, Michelle Obama urging countries to make bigger investments in girls' education and challenge laws and practice that disadvantaging women's basic human rights, such as; genital mutilation and cutting, forced child marriage, and also laws that allows marital rape and disadvantage women in workplace (Obama, Let Girls Learn, 2015).

*"We would never accept a life of dependence and abuse for our girls... we would never allow their bodies to be violated or for their potential to be squandered. We have to ask ourselves, 'Why would you accept this fate for any girls on this planet?... these girls are willing to risk their lives to get an education, so the least we can do is make sure they have school to attend."* (Hoerner, 2015).

Michelle Obama stated during her speech at a lunch sponsored by MORE magazine. Affirming her stance on combating the law practices that disadvantage the effort to improve the adolescent girls' education. In terms of partnership, the "Let Girls Learn!" initiative partners with countries that pursue the improvement of equal education opportunity and cultural value regarding women. In March 2015, Japan became the first country that joined the initiative, and committed to provide \$340 million toward girls' empowerment and gender-sensitive education programs, and also pledged to work alongside the Peace Corp on educating girls via their Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer. Throughout 2016, the initiative has managed to improve education for girls around the world by gradually expanding the "Let Girls Learn!" program to 35 more countries. The initiative managed to make an impact on girls' education, and will continue to do so according to their comprehensive plan (Bauer, 2016). Prior to Michelle Obama's issue address, Japan has struggled consistently in improving gender equality which resulted in them being ranked 101 out of 145 countries with high rates of gender inequality by the World Economic forum.

During her effort in raising awareness, while she was attending the World Innovation Summit for education, Michelle Obama took the stage and delivered her speech, which addressed that to just have a proper education at secondary school level, girls are being threatened. She also highlighted the shifting treatment to young girls when they hit adolescence, which were simply seen as a kid turned into a subject to all society biases around gender which ultimately caused them to fall behind their education (Haiti Now, N/A). Michelle Obama also went to venture to Liberia, Morocco, and Spain in order to raise awareness on women and girls focused education.

From the statement that was given by Ben Rhode as Michelle Obama's assistant and Deputy of National Security Adviser for Strategic Communication and Speech Writing by his conference call with the *Undefeated.com*. He stated that by going to the three different countries, the First Lady is will able to visit the three regions that are important to the United States because she is able to communicate not only to its government but also to its civilian and explain on what is the United States has been doing around the world. After her trip to Liberia, she continued her venture to Morocco where she had a discourse with the young girls discussing the education quality and challenge that they received in the region. And for the

last trip on her venture, she travels to Madrid to deliver her address which would elaborate the goals of the initiative (Jones, 2016).

### **Michelle Obama's Media Coverage**

The First Lady has great symbolic importance and influence over women's roles, and mass media involvement in interpreting the role of the First Lady. The coverage itself helps spread the messages in normalizing women's place into specific public space, thus legitimize the work of the First Lady, elevating the women's involvement in political culture, and gives the first ladies the celebrity-like status (Thornton, 2010).

Back in inaugurated of "Let Girls Learn" on March 2015, The First Lady has a great impact through her speech to motivate all girls around the countries. Empowering girls to become a backbone of a state-welfare and economic development start with quality of education. She mentions,

*"..but while the focus of this work is international, I just want to be clear that for me, Let Girls Learn isn't just about improving girls' education abroad. It's also about reminding our young people of the hunger they should be feeling for their own education here at home. I hope through Let Girls Learn, Our girls and our boys here in the U.S. will learn about the sacrifices girls worldwide are making to get their education.."* (The Obama White House, 2015).

In short to her speech, The First Lady, Michelle Obama mention, to empower young women and build more support to girls through "let Girls Learn!" (The Obama White House, 2015). As the first African-American First Lady, Michelle Obama has her own "Extra Burden" due to the significant absent for her predecessor and also the fact that her distinct qualities are affected and overshadowed by racialized notion by the current society believe that labels African-American women are viewed "ugly" or even invisible. The coverage of media on black women tends to center on magazine advertising, it has been described that black women are hyper-sexualized by the media and also portrayed to be vulnerable as how the media portray black women as the primary victim of crimes that are covered on the media, thus creating a unique challenges for Michelle Obama since the boundary to her roles suggest that does not possess to much influence or power (Thornton, 2010).

In order to oppose the negative image of African-American woman, Michelle Obama strategically craft her public persona, she were able to appeal the general public more

effectively than other national political figures by actively promote her husband's campaign, crafting an image as a role model for women, and rooting for causes that inside the traditional sphere of women activities (Elder, 2019).

Mrs. Obama recognized that the public has a preference for traditional-mannered First Lady, then she cleverly crafted her image as the fitting First Lady that matches the public expectation by focusing more on emphasizing the role of "mom-in-chief" and tries to not be involved in politics (Elder, 2019). However, in the pursuit of fulfilling the motherhood expectation, it is more complicated for Michelle Obama to fulfill the expectation due to the negative stereotype that is deeply attached to black women and black mothers for a long time. To combat that, Michelle Obama clearly stated in interviews that her priority is to raise her daughters and take care of the family, despite her highly educated background and accomplished career. It is revealed that according to the polling data, she not only succeeded in doing her role, she also succeeded in convincing the Americans that she is a parental figure (Elder, 2019).

Not only fulfilling the demand of representing the motherhood role model, she also fulfills the public expectation of fashionable First Lady by her clothing choice. However, her fashion choice is not only just a clothing piece, but also a platform for political statement that has its political and symbolic importance. Her fashion choice helps her in countering the negative stereotypes that relate to black women and creates a relatable image for the public, her fashion value later on is further highlighted when she's being compared with Melania Trump who received criticism for her clothing choice (Elder, 2019).

During her tenure that lasted for eight years, Michelle Obama has become a beloved figure. Based on the survey that was held by Gallup, a global performance management firm. The favorability rating of Michelle Obama reached 69%, more than her husband and other national political figures (Elder, 2019).

Her remarkable likability from so many Americans was the result of her ability to achieve high favorable evaluation throughout her period. Not to mention, as a prominent African-American woman, she also has to go against the obstacle in gathering public support which includes gendered racism and racialized sexism (Elder, 2019).

As the diplomatic agent that is given the task to promote the "Let Girls Learn!" initiative by raising the awareness on the issue that surrounds adolescent girls' education to both

domestic and global audiences. In order to further ignite the desired change and influence, consistent messaging and campaign are needed, Not to mention all of the numbers of supporters that are already gathered by Michelle Obama by fulfilling the role of American womanhood symbol and counter the negative media racialized notion and stereotype that surround African-American women that would help the spread of the awareness of the issue.

### **Michelle Obama's Interpersonal Approach**

In order to be connected with the audiences, Michelle Obama utilizes common structure and rhetoric tactic such as using her own and other girls personal narrative, and explains that unequal education for girls is a form of injustice that would give impact toward all genders, and it is necessary for nations to emphasize on the importance of equal education for girls. She manages to portray and narrate herself as a fellow girl that has to overcome gender barriers in order to pursue her goal through education (Bauer, 2016).

During her speech delivery in London, she mentions that she also shares similar background with the fellow young girls' audience, which was growing up in a family that come from working-class neighborhood where peoples work hard to sustain the daily necessity (Obama, Let Girls Learn! Remarks, 2015).

Continuing that notion, Michelle Obama then shared her story as an African- American woman during her speech in Tokyo, she shared that she was deemed not capable enough to pursue higher education.

*"I sometimes encounter teachers who assume that a girl from a humble background as mine wouldn't be a successful student. I was even told that I would never get accepted to a prestigious school like Princeton University, so I shouldn't apply."* She also viewed that the similar expectations are also faced by many girls across the globe. *"Like so many girls across the globe, I got the message that someone like me wasn't supposed to have big dreams; that I should keep my head down, my voice quiet and I should make myself just a little smaller to fit other people's modest expectation."* (Obama, Let Girls Learn Event Remark, 2015).

During her speech in Madrid, Spain. She shared her view on unequal expectation and treatment between men and women when both are compared to each other and also explains the unequal expectation between men and women. She explains the idea of how men got praised for a simple task that is outside of their traditional role such as something



as simple as changing the baby's diaper. Continuing to the idea that she express, she explain that women often get criticize for doing something that is outside their traditional role, she gave an example of women who stays to work overtime often to be criticized and accused of being selfish and neglecting their kids (The White House Office of the First Lady, 2016).

Despite her brilliant education and career background, Mrs. Obama still chooses to portray herself in this case as relatable as possible toward the audiences. As what has been quoted from three different remark quotes from three different events, there is a certain pattern or rhetoric tactic that she utilizes in order to amuse the audiences and persuade them to pursue the same goals as this initiative has.

As a part of the initiative that became the U.S. attempt to help the massive global effort in reaching global gender equal education opportunity through multilateral, bilateral, and regional engagement. Michelle Obama participated in building the bridge for the U.S. to cooperate with world leaders, government officials, and civilians by influencing and affecting their opinion through raising awareness regarding the issue.

Based on the three events that have been mentioned above, the author could observe her attempt of interpersonal communication by delivering her speech that used her own personal narrative between fixed groups once at a time. However, even though her speech was directed toward a small group, her speech was documented and later on posted on the White House official websites, and Michelle Obama's social media page, therefore widen the range of audience all over the globe.

Referring back to the three steps of the GPA theory that has been mentioned before, as the first step of practicing the interpersonal communication which was "Goal", it could be conclude that the primary goal of the communication that Michelle Obama exerts is to raise the awareness of the issue and influence the audiences that concludes world leaders, government officials, diplomats, and civilians to take part in the initiative. Therefore, building a bridge that closes the gap of the United States to collaborate multilateral and bilaterally in executing the program. As the second steps which was the "Plan" which represent the verbal and non-verbal action that were engaged in order to influence the recipient, which in this case is by delivering her speeches in three different speeches in the three different countries that would later on be documented on her social media page under #LetGirlsLearn and #62MillionGirls, and also in her daily trips entries on the website Hello Giggles in order to

widening the range of audience to all across the globe. And for the last step is the "Action", which was her effort in executing the plan and goal.

## **CONCLUSION**

In modern day, the FLOTUS has a developing role from being an "Unknown Institution" that centered in the parlors or drawing rooms and the dining area to becoming one of the state's diplomatic assets. And with the changing role of women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there are new possibilities that are provided for the first ladies to approach their role as political figures. And in this case is Michelle Obama as the FLOTUS to become the states' diplomatic agent. From the information that has been discussed in the discussion section, the author could conclude Michelle Obama's contribution toward the United States' public diplomacy by raising the awareness and attention toward the "Let Girls Learn!" initiative. As the United States' diplomatic agent, she manages to promote the initiative by doing several efforts such as addressing the unequal education issue during her speech delivery in World Innovation Summit for education, urging countries to make bigger investment to combat the issue, and communication effort to not only to the national government but also to its public in Liberia, Morocco, and Spain in order to spread the awareness on the initiative.

In order to be connected with the audiences, Michelle Obama employs interpersonal communication and utilizes common structure and rhetoric tactics such as using her own and other girls' personal narrative, and explains that unequal education for girls is a form of injustice that would give impact toward all genders.

Michelle Obama also promotes the initiative as a beneficial initiative for counterpart countries and its public, due to the fact that this program also includes the Obama Administration's investment that reached approximately \$1 billion in the recent and on-going programming by the U.S. Government. Thus, would increase family health, child survival, and investment in children's human capital.

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