

Center for Strategic and International Studies

Online Event

“The 19th Amendment 100 Years Later: A Conversation with Valerie Jarrett”

Featuring

Valerie Jarrett

*Board Chair, When We All Vote;
Co-Chair, The United State of Women*

CSIS Experts

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Introduction

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Date: Tuesday, July 28, 2020

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Kathleen Hicks:

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you so much for joining us today for this special Smart Women, Smart Power event as we continue celebrating five (areas ?) of smart and powerful conversations that amplify the voices of women.

2020 is also the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment that gave women the right to vote. Excuse me. And joining us today to talk about the importance of voting and her efforts to increase voter participation is Valerie Jarrett, board chair of the When We All Vote organization and co-chair of The United State of Women.

Ms. Jarrett will be joined today by Beverly Kirk, director of the Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative here at CSIS.

The Smart Women, Smart Power speaker series is possible thanks to our founding partner, Citi. We're grateful for Citi's continued support. And it's my pleasure to welcome Candi Wolff, head of – excuse me – global government affairs at Citi.

Candida Wolff:

Thank you, Kath. And thank you all for joining us today for this online series for Smart Women, Smart Power in our new virtual format.

I think for those of you who have had a hand in planning all of these events, particularly at CSIS and in particular in this very event-driven town, there are some advantages that I think we've found to the virtual events. We can draw some fantastic speakers, like the one we have today in Valerie Jarrett, and also be able to have more attendees. And so I want to thank all of you for joining us and in particular shout out to the number of Citi attendees today.

In a few minutes Bev will introduce our guest speaker, but I wanted to welcome Ms. Jarrett to the Smart Women, Smart Power stage as we get to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment. Citi's been around for more than 200 years and seen a lot of historic milestones in that timespan, but I think this has to rank as pretty high among them in terms of impact. But even a hundred years later it's clear that we still have work to do, not only in terms of gender equality but, as the killing of George Floyd revealed, race equality as well.

A couple of years ago at Citi we started talking more openly about our own room for improvement when it comes to equity for women and African American representation in the firm. We became the first bank to disclose our unadjusted, or raw, gender pay gap, which revealed a lack of representation among women at the highest levels of our firm. The

numbers also showed a lack of Black employees in the most senior positions.

To rectify these inequalities, we set public goals to increase our representation of women and Black employees going forward. These goals started a more transparent conversation about where we stood as a firm, and milestones like the anniversary of women's suffrage offer another opportunity to continue the dialogue about the integral role that women play in our democratic society.

I'm really looking forward to listening to Ms. Jarrett about what she thinks where we stand and the work that she is passionately pursuing to bring more people into the process. Bev, back to you for the introduction and to start the conversation.

Beverly Kirk: Candi, thank you so much. And thanks to Citi for being our founding partner and supporting this effort with Smart Women, Smart Power over the past five years.

Well, our guest this afternoon practically needs no introduction. Valerie Jarrett was the longest-serving senior advisor to President Barack Obama. She oversaw the Offices of Public Engagement and Intergovernmental Affairs and chaired the White House Council on Women and Girls. As previously mentioned, she is today the board chair of When We All Vote and the co-chair of United State of Women. She's also a member of several corporate boards, and is a senior distinguished fellow at the University of Chicago Law School, and also a senior advisor to the Obama Foundation. And Valerie Jarrett, thank you so much for being here today.

Valerie Jarrett: Well, thank you, Beverly. And Kathleen and Candi, thank you for your support. I am delighted to be here for this conversation that I've really been looking forward to for a while. So thank you, Beverly.

Beverly Kirk: Well, we're looking forward to speaking with you.

And for those of you who are watching online, you are free to submit questions. We'll have a conversation here for about 30 minutes and then we'll start asking the questions that you submit through our online portal on the CSIS webpage for this event.

The first question I want to pose for you is: We've certainly come a long way since 1920, but what do you see as the continuing major barriers to true equality for women?

Valerie Jarrett:

Well, there are many, and I think part of the challenge is realizing that we are not one size fits all. We are not issue-oriented, just one issue. For example, I care a lot about women's health and I care a lot about entrepreneurship and education and making sure that the business community recognizes that we shouldn't be leaving half of our talent on the sidelines, and so therefore we should focus on equal pay and workplace flexibility and paid leave and paid sick days and a workplace free from sexual harassment. So there are lots of issues that go into gender equity for women and girls. And I think what we need is both the academic world to look at evidence-based strategies that work; we need government to step up and set some broad parameters at the federal, state, and local level; we need a business community that appreciates that diversity is a strength and therefore you have to take concrete steps to focus on inclusion; and we need women to use their voices – lift up their voices to talk about what our needs are.

And I will say to you, when I started out my career – a very long time ago, let's face it – as a young lawyer at a big law firm, in my wildest dreams I wouldn't have felt that I should be advocating for myself. I didn't ask questions like what are your policies that support working families before I started working there. I just went in there and I tried to keep my head down. I put up with a lot of harassment and a lot of nasty, vile jokes because I didn't want people to think that I couldn't be a team player. And I think the good news is that that paradigm has changed a lot.

And one of the reasons why I'm so passionate about voting rights is that I think that it is one of the ways that we can use our voices to ensure that people who are making public policies that affect all of our lives are ones that reflect our values and our priorities, and then we have to hold them accountable. And I think that we have seen a great deal of activism over the last hundred years, from the women who participated in the suffrage movement and demonstrated and hunger strikes and went to jail and husbands shunned them, to the people who are out right now demonstrating in the streets about social justice. And that's part of how change has always happened in our country. We have to put pressure on those who are in positions of power to recognize the importance of gender equity.

So we still have a long way to go. Women still are only earning about 80 cents on the dollar. That's unacceptable. Women of color much less. But I do think that our voices are much more powerful than they have historically been.

Beverly Kirk:

Let me follow up about the moment that we're in in this country and the work that you're doing as board chair for When We All Vote. That organization is particularly focused on increasing voter participation

across the board, but there's a special emphasis on increasing gender-focused participation and age participation. What made you want to do this work? And are you seeing – given the moment that we're in with the protests and the conversation in the country right now, what do you see in terms of people being more engaged?

Valerie Jarrett:

Sure. So let's take a step back. So When We All Vote was founded by former First Lady Michelle Obama. And after the last presidential election we spent a lot of time looking at the data, and what we learned was that – (audio break) – percent of eligible voters did not vote. A hundred million Americans opted out. And we found that was particularly the case for people of color, many whose votes were suppressed; and young people, who disproportionately do not vote in record numbers. And so we thought, well, what can we do to really try to change the culture in our country around voting?

And we created a 501(c)(3) which is nonpartisan by design. We didn't want this to be about politics. We wanted it to be about civic responsibility, and that if we could appeal to people, meet them where they are with people who they are influenced by, then perhaps we could see an uptick in those numbers – and not just registering and voting, but being an informed voter. And so we would ask people, what are the issues that you care about? You know, is it climate change? Is it social justice? Is it criminal justice reform? You know, whatever the issues are that motivate you. And then who are the candidates that reflect those values?

And importantly, this is not simply about the president and who's running for the most – the highest office in the land. And it's about who's on your local school board, the mayor, the city council, the state legislature, the county that oversees health, the check and balance in Congress. And the kind of painful – well, not kind of – the really painful lesson I think that we've learned over the course of this year with the combination of this COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the unrest and social movement that we've seen around racial treatment in our country is a sense that we now understand the role the government can play in our lives. I mean, there are a lot of folks who may not have even known who their governors were before, but now as we see how different states have handled the virus we appreciate better the role of a governor.

On the issue of the tensions between police and communities of color, people are now paying attention, well, who does appoint the superintendent of police? And who are the prosecutors making decisions about whether or not to bring charges? And what is the relationship between a local prosecutor who might have a close relationship – necessarily close relationship with the local police versus the attorney

general in the case of Minnesota, who took the case away to ensure that there was integrity to the process? What funds are being appropriated by Congress to make sure that we have unemployment insurance and loans for small businesses and enough funds to pay for vital equipment that we need to keep ourselves safe?

And so the conversations that we've been having actually this year I think are more easy for people to digest than perhaps they have been historically – though I must say to you, Beverly, that after the 2016 election we did see a big uptick in activism beginning with the Women's March right after the election and Climate March and March for Our Lives to end gun violence, and so people are becoming more engaged. And the question is – well, first of all, and that is good. We want people actively engaged, caring about issues that are important to them, peacefully demonstrating. But then the question is, what do you do with it next?

And then what we're saying is, and you have to vote. You can't only demonstrate in the streets and allow the people who feel no accountability to stay in office if you think that there should be a change. And once you elect the people in office, then you've got to hold them accountable. And so there's really an entire pattern to change this culture.

So a data point that might be of interest is that in the 2018 midterm elections, first of all, we elected more women to Congress than ever before in our nation's history. And I have to tell you, having spent a fair amount of time working with Congress, it could only get better if there are more women in it. And let's face it also, we don't want a country where people who are making decisions don't reflect the rich diversity of our country. Their decisions won't be as informed. And so that was a good thing. But we also saw voter turnout go up in the midterm elections. But young people, for example, who in 2014 only 20 percent of them voted, well, in this midterms it was 30 percent. So statistically that's a big move, but it shows there's still 70 percent that did not vote.

So this is a long-term project of Michelle Obama's and a host of co-chairs that she has, all people who we think can reach people where they are – people who are influential – and it's everybody from like America's dad, Tom Hanks, to Janelle Monáe to Lin-Manuel Miranda, all kinds of folks. And we will have hundreds of ambassadors from around the country, everything from high school students who are competing to try to figure out which high school could get the most people registered, to colleges and universities, to the mayors around the country, the business community. Many businesses are now involved in ensuring that their workforce is registered, as well as those who they have contact with. So it's a everybody-welcome approach, knowing that we have to – that our

democracy and its strength really relies on elections and making sure that we have people who are representing our interests making decisions that affect our lives and our livelihood.

Beverly Kirk: And speaking of Mrs. Obama, she just released a video launching the push for voter – for voter registration 100 days out from the upcoming election.

Valerie Jarrett: Yes.

Beverly Kirk: That was just on Sunday.

Valerie Jarrett: That's exactly right. That was 100 days. We're down to 98. And I think she's just trying to say, look, particularly in this global pandemic, register early. She's also called for expanding voting by mail. There's no evidence that it leads to vote fraud and it's a safer way for people to vote, because we saw the lines after those midterms – after the primary elections where people were having to choose between exercising that right to vote and keeping themselves safe, and we should be able to do both. And the studies show that voting by mail doesn't favor one party over another and there isn't fraud, so let's do that. We also are calling on states to expand early voting so that people can vote over more days, which they should do anyway but particularly in a pandemic so we have fewer people on election day. And everyone should be able to register online. These are just basics that we think will help ensure a fair and safe and accessible election.

Beverly Kirk: Are you concerned that the COVID pandemic will keep people from the polls?

Valerie Jarrett: Yes, very much so. That's, again, why we are encouraging the vote by mail, particularly people who are vulnerable – senior citizens, people with preexisting conditions. I am sure that many of them will shy away from those lines that were terrifying. And so we think that that's why every day – every one of these 98 days is so important because we have to put pressure on the secretaries of state to realize that the goal here should be having more people participate. And I say that because I'm stunned that we still have states in our country that are passing laws that make it difficult for people to vote. And given that there is not vote fraud in our country – the amount that is there is de minimis – let's figure out how to have a fair and safe election.

But I do worry. I worry a great deal that there will be people who say I just – I don't want to put my – you know, risk it and go out and vote, and they ought to be able to just drop an envelope in the mail.

Beverly Kirk: One in ten eligible voters coming up in the electorate for 2020 are Generation Z, which they're the people born 1996 and coming forward. Do you think that the younger generation is going to be more engaged, just given the energy in the country right now, you know, post the – well, as a result of the protests and that engagement? Do you think it's actually going to maybe help to increase the number of young people from maybe 30 percent to 40 percent or even 50 percent?

Valerie Jarrett: I surely hope so. And I will say that, you know, I'm old enough to remember the civil rights movement of the '60s, and with the recent passing of John Lewis and C.T. Vivian, icons of the civil rights movement who sacrificed mightily in order for people of color to have the right to vote in this country. And you know, we celebrate the fact that it's a hundred years since the 19th Amendment, but we know that there were women of color who still didn't get to vote after the 19th Amendment passed. And so with their sacrifices, I think it's an important time to say, look, what more can we do to make this election – all elections – relevant?

And I think the good news is, for younger people, that they are issue-oriented. They care a lot about the issues. And so then it's up to us to draw the connection between the issues that they care about and the people running for office.

But I hasten to add – and I say this to any young people who are watching – like, no candidate is going to be perfect, and we can't let perfect be the enemy of the good. And I – and I fear that historically – well, there are many reasons why people don't vote. They don't think one vote matters, but we've seen in many cases where races are very close. I mean, the last presidential election, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote. She lost in three states and the Electoral College by fewer than 100,000 votes. So you break that down to each district and it does matter.

Other reasons we hear is, well, you know, I don't like any of them. They're making decisions that affect your life, so one has to be better than the other. You can't compare it to the Almighty, compare it to the alternative, to coin – use a phrase that Vice President Biden used to always use long before he was running for president.

And so what we want to do is help them understand the relevancy of their participation, and to also recognize that, look, if you want to live in a democracy, yes, there are privileges, but there are also responsibilities. And voting is a responsibility. Now, I take a more radical position in that I believe that there should be mandatory voting in our country. I'm on a one-person mission to get this done. So far I haven't gotten much traction in Congress; it doesn't like to mandate much

of anything. But the reason why I tend to think we should require – and there are countries like Australia that do, and a modest fee if you don't participate. But the people understand that there are responsibilities, that you have to participate.

And I also think that if everybody voted, politicians would be more likely to not be on one extreme or the other because most people are in the middle. And what tends to happen is that the money and the energy goes to either end, and I think that in a country as big and complex and interesting and diverse as ours we have to recognize that compromise can't be a bad word. You can't get 100 percent of what you want. And so what I want to say to the younger people is, is that good is better. Don't let perfect be the enemy of the good. Your life partner isn't going to be perfect. Your family members are not perfect. And so don't expect your elected officials to be perfect, but do hold them to a higher standard than we would hold the general population because in them we are putting our trust.

Beverly Kirk:

A couple things. You mentioned the death of Congressman John Lewis, and I should add that in addition to this being the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment it is the 55th anniversary of the passage of the Voting Rights Act, anniversary coming up in August just as the anniversary of suffrage is coming up in August. And along those lines, are you surprised that 100 years after the 19th Amendment we still don't have an Equal Rights Amendment?

Valerie Jarrett:

Disappointed, and I was – actually am happy to say I facilitate a phone call for women around the country – anybody, actually around the country – to hear what Vice President Biden's proposals and plans are for gender equity, and one of them is to call for the passage of the ERA. It's crazy that three-fourths of our state(s) have approved it, and yet we don't have embedded in our Constitution this fundamental right for women. So I'm hoping that it happens in the next four years.

I will say this, talking about major civil rights leaders, Martin Luther King used to say the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice. And President Obama added to that on the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington: and it bends faster when we all push together. Which gets back to my theme of civic engagement and pushing.

And so I think progress in our country always takes time. One year for my birthday President Obama gave me two documents that I have framed in the other room, kept them with me ever since. One is a petition for universal suffrage that was signed in 1866, and alongside of it is the resolution that was introduced in the Congress in 1919 calling for the 19th Amendment. Fifty-three years between those two, and then another

year before actually it was approved. And his point was change takes time.

And so to young people, for example, who get frustrated because they have everything, like, in the palm of their hand and used to that instant gratification, the women who protested and were in the hunger strikes and everything that I mentioned earlier, they did not for the most part live to see the actual passage of the 19th Amendment. But the work that they did laid the foundation, and that's part of how change happens in this country.

I was so glad that John Lewis, his last public act was out on the plaza in front of the White House looking at "Black lives matter" written on the sidewalk and being able to say, OK, there are demonstrations around the country that now have all 50 states, people of all backgrounds, all races, all – well, just everybody out there calling for social justice. And for him to have – over the arc of his 80 years to see that change is a – is tremendous, but we don't always get to see it. And I want people to take heart that the work that they do lays the foundation.

Final point on this. When President Obama took office, same-sex marriage was legal in two states. By the time the Supreme Court ruled in 2015, it was legal in 37 states and the District of Columbia. And then, of course, it became legal for our whole country. And it felt like a thunderbolt, right – until you think about the decades of hard work that activists put in in state by state by state that leads to these thunderbolts.

And so long way of answering your question, Beverly, change takes time. And it takes a sustained effort over time. Nobody who has power who is enjoying the status quo gives it up lightly. And half of what we have to do is get everyone to recognize that we will be better off as a country if we are more equal. It's not a zero-sum game. It's not taking something away from somebody else to be – to hold ourselves accountable. It's why I'm so glad Candi was talking about the fact that Citibank is looking at their pay. Most companies have no idea whether or not they're paying women equally. Well, first collect the data, and then make a commitment that you're going to do something about it. And that will be good for business. It will be good for working families. It will certainly be good for women.

Beverly Kirk:

You mentioned early in the conversation the midterm election of 2018, and how more women were elected to Congress. What is it going to take to get women – even more women, and women from both sides of the aisle, to run for office and get really active in the political process? I know that there are any number of stumbling blocks to doing that, but what will it take in order to make sure that, you know, perhaps there's

gender parity in Congress? I mean, we can hope that that happens someday.

Valerie Jarrett:

Well, I'd say a few things on that. One, there's safety in numbers. The fact that we have more women in Congress than before, and we've seen how they've been supportive of one another. When one is attacked, the way Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was last week by one of her colleagues in a vile and profane way, not only did she stand up on the floor and speak up for herself, but the women in Congress spoke up for her. And so I think there is safety in numbers.

And I also think we all need role models. The more people you see who run for office that look like you, the more confidence that you too could run for office. And then there are great organizations – one that I've been involved with called Run for Something. And it's run by a young woman named Amanda Litman who worked on Hillary Clinton's campaign. And she said after the election she sat on her couch from the Election Day until the Inauguration day, and just ate. Sat on her couch and ate and slept. And on Inauguration Day she got up and she said: You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to help more people run for office because raising money is a barrier, the technicalities of how you do it are barriers. So there are organizations such as hers that are out there that are trying to make it easier to run for office.

And I think then the rest of it is up to us. We have to support women who decide to run. And I don't mean just financially supporting them, but when they come under attack – and they will – we have to be there and have their backs. And I think it is – having started my career in public service working for local government in Chicago, which is a rough-and-tumble city, it is rough and tumble. I mean, it is not for the faint of heart. And I do believe that women who run for office are more likely to get into it for the service part of it, rather than the trappings of power. And that's a good thing. And so you know a young woman who's interested, or an older woman who's interested in running for office, support her. Sometimes it just takes a little push.

And a big piece of what I try to do now that I've been at this for so long is to talk to folks who are thinking of running, or who are running, and giving them encouragement because it is – public service is hard. It should be hard. But I think it's harder in this current toxic environment than is necessary.

Beverly Kirk:

I want to remind our viewers that you can ask a question. Submit it through the CSIS webpage for this event.

We do have one question from Eileen Pennington from The Asia Foundation. She says, women's political representation, as well as representation in leadership positions, which we've been talking about, and government and corporations remains quite low despite the advancements in other areas of gender equality. What lessons can we draw from global efforts to secure women's voting rights that can be applied to achieving gender equality in terms of women's leadership, voice, and agency?

Valerie Jarrett:

Well, that's a lot. So you do wonder, for example, why have we not had more women in senior positions, both in business and in politics in our country, compared to some other countries? And I think that we live with the vestiges of sexism in our country. And it isn't reserved simply to men. I mean, a lot of times you'll look at polling and women are as concerned about putting women in leadership positions as men are. And part of it is it's just change. It's something new. I mean, certainly I know when President Obama first started running for office, my parents, both African American, grew up during Jim Crow, inconceivable to them that a Black person, particularly one that they knew, could be elected president. And yet, it happened.

And so I think the more we reinforce it, the less unusual it will seem. The more women who are serving on corporate boards and who are – and who aren't just serving on corporate boards as a figure head, but are there chairing the honor committee, and chairing the compensation committee, and demanding accountability, and asking the CEO: What are we doing here to not just say we support diversity and lip service, but what are our inclusive policies? And what are the ways in which we are measuring the success of women as they move up throughout the organization? And are we valuing it enough to tie our compensation to it – for example? If you really believe diversity is a strength, and inclusion is a policy and a practice that allows you to have diversity, then it should be a core part of your business.

And so I think it's up to women and our allies to challenge the status quo. And we should do it from wherever we sit. And for those of us who don't have voices to do it, I'll say this to you. I talked about when I was a young lawyer and didn't advocate for myself. I became a single mom pretty early in my daughter's life. And I had a good paying job, I had health insurance, I had a sitter who started with me when Laura was three months old and helped me pack her off to college – who showed up to work every single day. I had parents who lived a mile away from me. My dad took my daughter to school every single day of her life and picked her up. And I felt like I was hanging on by my fingertips. And I'm sure there are many of you who had the same feeling.

And in that early time in my life I thought, well, if it's this hard for me, oh my goodness, what must it be like for women who are working two jobs on minimum wages, who don't have reliable childcare, who don't have a support network around them, who worry about whether or not their children are going to have enough to eat and keep a roof over their head. Forty percent of working moms are the primary breadwinner in their family. A woman's contribution to the family income is more important than it's ever been. And it was in those early years that I thought: I need to use my voice to advocate for people who can't advocate for themselves, who are not in positions of power, who are dependent upon that job and can't fight for the rights that we know they deserve.

And so I think that that awakening that I experienced 30 years, we are seeing, I think, more broadly today. Where people recognize we have to level the playing field. More companies are looking at their data and seeing whether or not there are impediments to women progressing up on that corporate ladder, impediments to them running for office, impediments to them fulfilling their responsibilities for children and now for older parents, who are living, thankfully, longer, but add to the responsibilities that still disproportionately fall on women.

Beverly Kirk:

And that's something that's come up in the midst of this pandemic, the extra work that is falling on women who are having to deal with schooling their kids at home while they're balancing the work that they're doing professionally. Is that something that has come to the forefront of our attention now, even though it's been happening for a long time. But it's now right here in our faces, and an issue that we should try to figure out how to deal with and how to solve?

Valerie Jarrett:

Yes, absolutely. And again, I think this COVID-19 pandemic has put a real bright spotlight on many issues that have been systemic for a long time: The low wages of many of our essential workers, the fact that people in our restaurants traditionally don't have paid leave or even paid sick days, and yet in a pandemic do you really want somebody in a restaurant forced to work while not feeling well because they can't afford the wages that they would lose, or the job that they would lose if they take time off? The health disparities that have become apparent for women of color, people of color, illnesses like hypertension, and high blood pressure, and diabetes, heart disease, that are disproportionately in the Black community now have much more dire consequences for those who are becoming ill.

And so yes, I think that the stresses of – the stresses that have been there but have not had a spotlight on them are now beginning to show. And I think that we are seeing momentum. And the question is, is this going to

be just a moment, or will we look back on this and say: In 2020 through tragedy and challenge and strife, we made progress? And that people took ownership – ownership – in what life is like, not just in their family but in other families too?

Beverly Kirk: We have a question from Rebecca at Citi.

Are there any initiatives in your organization advocating against felony disenfranchisement?

Valerie Jarrett: Yes, we argue for people who have paid their debt to society to be able to vote. And it's even more complicated than that, as I learned within the last year. Even though Florida now allows those who have been released from prison to vote, but not until they clean up any back debts that they owe. And there are many places around our country that we know have patterns and practice of discriminatory behavior. Let's take Ferguson, Missouri, for an example.

There our Justice Department when President Obama was in office launched a pattern of practice because we heard when we went to Ferguson in the wake of Michael Brown's death that Black people were just routinely given tickets for, you know, you might have a taillight out, and then you get a ticket, and then you don't go to court because you can't take off of work, and when you don't go to court then there's a bench warrant for your arrest, and so then you get picked up and you're put in jail. And while you're in jail the fee or the penalty for your not having paid for that taillight continue to go up.

And it was a way the city of Ferguson made money. And they did it in a totally discriminatory way. And so we forced their hand at this to reform. And so I say that as an example to say: We have to figure out what are these underlying issues that lead to – lead to discrepancies? And are we having a disproportionate impact on people who are citizens? And in the case of those who've been incarcerated, if we expect them to lead law-abiding laws, take care of their families, be responsible citizens of our country, then they should – then they have also earned the right to vote.

And we cannot hold their past against them, because the whole point of our system is to say once you're released from prison we want you to be back in society. We want you to be a responsible person. So I think states around the country should follow the lead of Florida, but also not penalize people who do have still existing financial responsibilities, when we know they didn't have the wherewithal to remedy them.

Beverly Kirk: I want to shift gears a little bit here because I do want to ask you about your book, "Finding My Voice," that's a bestseller. And as we – as we

consider the questions that are coming in from the audience, I want to ask you some personal questions. A lot of people may not know that you were born in Shiraz, Iran. And you write about how your father, that you mentioned, he was a very acclaimed doctor, a pathologist. And he took a job in Shiraz, Iran because he could not get work in 1950 segregated Chicago. What was it like growing up in Shiraz, and how did those formative years in Iran shape your worldview?

Valerie Jarrett:

Well, for me, my memories of Iran were nothing but wonderful. And you know, you never know whether your childhood memories are accurate or whether you just embellish them with age. So for example, when I was writing my book I included that it was 80 degrees and sunny every day. And my mom read the book and she said: You know, it snowed there sometimes? And I was like, I don't have any memory of snow. I just have memories of it being warm, and the food being wonderful, and the people being unbelievably generous.

And we lived on a hospital compound associated with the hospital that my father helped launch. And he chaired the department of pathology there. And as you mentioned, Beverly, that was a job he could not get in the United States. He wanted to go into academic medicine, and he couldn't find a job comparable to his white counterparts. And so he and my mom, who are adventuresome spirits to say the least, looked for opportunities outside the United States. And he landed this job.

And at that point the United States and Iran had very strong diplomatic ties. And the shah of Iran was very interested in improving health care. And so he was starting hospitals around the country and recruiting physicians from all over the world to work with the Iranian physicians. And so we lived on a hospital compound with families from all over the world. I spoke French, and English, and Farsi all in the same sentence sometimes. And I learned – well, I learned three big things.

One, that I could walk into a room and find something in common with whoever's in that room. And that skill came in handy whether I was in private business in Chicago or working for the government, and certainly in the White House where we had to take people who disagreed with us about many issues, but we could find them one way – we could work with them on one issue. And it's just kind of an attitude, I think, that comes from being around people who have different backgrounds. But you find children play the same wherever they're from. And that stayed with me.

The other thing I learned is that if you have lived outside of the United States perhaps you have a better appreciation for the United States. People who have only been here take our freedoms for granted – whether it's our freedom of speech to the quality of our water and our

food, and the illnesses that we have here. And my mom, boy, she boiled everything I drank, and peeled everything I ate, and worried about diseases. And none of that exists here. And certainly when you compare a democracy to anything else, the freedoms are better here.

And then finally, and really importantly, the United States is an incredible country. It's not the only country. And you can learn a great deal outside of our shores. And I think the time that I spent in Iran helped me as an adult put the United States in the broader context, which I think is important since our big challenges that we face today are global challenges. We can't tackle climate change with the United States alone. We can't tackle disease, whether it's COVID-19 or Ebola, in the United States alone. We need a global approach to these issues. And I think that that's – that perspective has helped me.

But I also mention in the book, I came here to the United States after a year in London, and my father finally did land a job at the University of Chicago, in the community where my mom grew up, and her mom lived, and her sister. A job he said he would not have been available to him if he had not been able – if he had not been willing to take the long way around. And that was a life lesson too. But when I showed up in the United States, my goodness, I was five years old. I was put in second grade. Had gone to great schools. Spoke three languages. I had a British accent. That one year in Great Britain I developed a British accent.

And I was different. And so I never liked to talk about Iran. I never liked – nobody has heard of it back then. And I just wanted to be like every other kid. My parents used to traipse around through Africa for my father's research in summers after that and end up back in Iran. And I just wanted to go to summer camp like everybody else. And so it took me a long time to appreciate that what I thought was different and made me kind of an other actually shaped me in very fundamental ways that I think are important.

Beverly Kirk:

But you had a freedom that a lot of people in 1950s American, particularly African Americans, did not have.

Valerie Jarrett:

True.

Beverly Kirk:

And that had to have an impact on you. What was it?

Valerie Jarrett:

Well, it's interesting. I'll tell you – I'll tell you a story. So after the election of President Obama I was with my parents. And my dad was pretty ill at that point. And so we were worried about him, and we watched it in his hospital room together. And then – we watched – we watched – actually, we watched "60 Minutes," right? The week after the

election they were on “60 Minutes,” the president-elect and his wife. And I watched it with my parents. And at the end of it, my parents – my mom first said to me: How did you know that he could win? Not that he would win, but even that he could win?

And I said, because you raised me to believe that I could do anything, that anything was possible. And if I had a dream, and I worked hard, and I was resilient, and I didn’t give up, and I had a little bit of luck, it would all go my way. And she looked at me she looked at my dad, and she said: Well, I never believed that. And I realized – and then my father says, yeah, I didn’t believe that either. And I realized for the first time, Beverly, that my parents raised me aspirationally. Not shackled by the reality that they had experienced, living through Jim Crow and experiencing discrimination and racism, but really as the world that they hoped I would discover on my own.

And I think by being in Iran, where we were free from – I mean, look, we were Americans. We weren’t African Americans. We weren’t Black Americans, or Negro Americans, if that’s what it was back then. We were just Americans. And so in those formative years I was not shackled with any of that. And then they were able to continue to raise me. But they did say to me, they also hastened to add, but you know what? You’re going to have work twice as hard. And I didn’t know quite what that meant, but I just knew I better work hard. And they worked hard, so I had great role models.

Beverly Kirk:

And what role did these experiences play in your decision to become a lawyer, and all of the work that you’ve recounted for us that you’ve done on fairness, and equality, and justice issues?

Valerie Jarrett:

Well, so let’s be honest, now that we’ve been talking about 45 minutes, look, I didn’t start out this way. I started out coming out of college with a cockamamie 10-year plan that I made up, because I thought I should have a plan. Everybody had a plan. So I was going to go right to law school, because I honestly couldn’t figure out what else to do. And my best friend had gone to law school. So she said, go. It’ll buy you some time. You’ll figure out what you want to do. So I was going to go to law school, discover my passion in the law, probably return home to Chicago. I’d been away from home for college and for law school. Fall in love, get married, have a baby by 30, mindful of my biological clock, and live happily ever after. That was my plan.

And 10 years into my plan my book begins with me sitting in a beautiful office, on a high floor, in a high-rise building in Chicago, with a magnificent view of Lake Michigan, married to figuratively the boy next door, our moms grew up in the same apartment building, known each

other our whole lives, I'd had a crush on him since I was eight and he was 12. Miserable at my job, miserable in my marriage, and looking at this baby that I had and thinking to myself: Will she ever actually be proud of me? And the answer was no. She wouldn't be proud if I stayed at that job. She wouldn't be proud if I stayed in that marriage.

And thankfully I had a friend who pushed me, but everybody thought I had the perfect life. And I needed somebody to say to me: If it's not perfect for you, then it's not perfect. And I think before then I had kind of honestly been a passive participant in my life. I was thinking my husband would take care of me, and he didn't. I was thinking that the job would just be wonderful because it was high paying, and it wasn't. And it's then that I decided to join local government. And I learned how to advocate for the people who didn't have voices. And I had a great mentor when I was in local government, and African American woman who was a real amazing supportive leader, and tough as nails. Terrified me to some degrees. But she looked after me and give me opportunities and pushed me.

And that's when I started to look around and say how lucky I had been, and with that good fortune what was I going to do to make life better for those who didn't have the advantages I had. And that the nobleness of public service at the local level, where – when I say noble, what I mean is you can't go to the grocery store without somebody coming up to you and saying what they want . They have your phone number. They know where you live. It's 24/7. And you have to learn to listen. And that's as it should be.

And those experiences really helped me find my voice, a voice that I really didn't have as a very young person. I think I was painfully shy because of this exotic background. And it made me really kind of doubt myself, until I realized how fortunate I had been and how satisfying it could be to advocate for other people.

Beverly Kirk:

So what advice do you have for people and women in particular who want to make some type of huge shift in their lives? You just described what most people would say is a pretty major life change, to right the path. What advice to you have, particularly for young women who may be listening to you, and looking up to you, and saying: Oh, she's had the perfect life. I want to do that. But you came to a point where you wanted to shift. What's your advice?

Valerie Jarrett:

Well, first of all, they can use me as my exhibit A, which is why I wrote a book telling my whole story, because you would not, Beverly, have invited me to come here today had I stayed I that boring job at the law firm, trust me. I would not have been of any interest to you. And so I

think one of the first lessons that I had to learn is that no matter what everybody else is telling you your passion should be, you have to learn to listen to the most important voice, and that's the quiet one inside of you.

And I think that I started to listen to that voice because I was so miserable. And I actually am so glad I was as miserable as I was, because if it had just been OK maybe I would have wallowed in mediocrity for a very long time. But misery is a great motivation. And I think the adventure begins when you pivot, when you take chances, when you can take risks. And look, some of us aren't in a position to take a risk. We don't have a safety net. But if you do, then take that risk.

And each time I've made a shift, whether it was going from the law firm to local government, leaving the practice of law after 10 years, moving to the mayor's office, running the Department of Planning and Development, being the CEO of a real estate company, being a senior advisor to President Obama. Every time I've taken a new job I have been terrified. I have thought, there's no way I can do this job. And then I proved to myself, most importantly, oh, of course I can.

And I think that sometimes we just have to get out of our own way, and take a chance, take a risk, and that means being vulnerable. It means you do have to put yourself out there and recognize you might stumble and fall. And goodness knows, I've stumbled and fallen a hundred times. But the good thing about stumbling and falling is you discover, oh, I can actually get back up. I can brush off my skinned knee, and it will heal, and I will get back up.

And, I mean, I had so many experiences in local government in Chicago – and I'll share just one for those of you who are in the spotlight and worry about, you know, criticism. The Chicago Tribune, my hometown paper, did an editorial criticizing me when a big company, Spiegel's Catalogue, which I believe is now out of business, moved out of Chicago. And my job – one of my jobs when I was commissioner of planning and development was economic development. Keep jobs in the city. And it was a horrible cartoon and, I thought, unfair, because we had tried hard to keep them.

And so I went into Mayor Daley and I was, like, I can't believe they wrote this article criticizing me! There was a cartoon! And he looked at me like I'd lost my mind. He said, do you read the paper every day? What do you think they say about me every day? And then he said, if you think it was an unfair cartoon or editorial, march over to the editorial board and tell them. And I said, I get to do that? And he said, well, of course you get to do that. If you don't advocate for yourself, who is going to? And it was like a lightbulb went off in my head. And I felt so empowered. And so I

think that's one thing we have to do. We have to be better at advocating or ourselves and saying what our needs are, recognizing that in so doing we enlighten people who can make our life easier.

And I was eight months pregnant – eight and a half months pregnant, closing some real estate deal at 2:00 in the morning with a conference room full of men. And I would get up and I'd say: I'm going to the vending machine. I'm going to check my messages. I'm going to the xerox machine, back when we still xeroxed things. Where was I going? To the bathroom, because that's what you do when you're eight a half months pregnant. But I would never have told the guys that. I was trying to pretend like nothing happens from here down, because I thought they would take me less seriously. But in so doing, I was denying my own needs. And I do think that particularly the younger generation of women and men are better – sometimes too good – at advocating for themselves. (Laughs.) And so that's part of how we make progress too.

And we're also – I think finally on this I would say – and my book has a lot of this in more detail – is that when I was young working mom – and I hope there's some young working moms out there for whom this will resonate – I thought: Well, if I were just smarter, better organized, more disciplined, slept fewer hours, maybe this wouldn't all be so hard. And I told you earlier, I had all the safety net you could ask for, but I just was hanging on by my fingertips. And finally I was like – and I didn't tell anybody. I was like, I got this. There are a thousand balls up in the air, dropping everywhere, but I've – no, no, I have this.

And finally it dawned on me, no, there's nothing wrong with me. This is just hard. And that's what started me thinking, well, what can we do to make it less hard on working families? You know, why do men get more pay than women? Why don't we all have an appropriate paid leave, not just for women but I believe that there should be parity for men and women. If we want men to be responsible in the lives of their children, why don't we have equality there? Why did I have to suck up all those horrible racist, sexist, jokes just to be in the club? Why did I have to ensure that kind of humiliation and harassment? And what can we do, both in terms of public policy and in terms of business practices, to remove all of those obstacles so that we are free to compete on the even playing field?

Because, you know what, I'm not asking for an edge. Just give me the even playing field and I know I can compete. And that's what I hear from women and girls all across this country, is just level it for us. And I realize, I think, just how it continues to be unlevel. And I think it's going to take lots of voices out there – and not just women. We need allies as

well, recognizing that it is in our collective interest to have that level playing field.

Beverly Kirk: You mentioned the work that you've done in local government. And is it true that you once thought about running for mayor of Chicago?

Valerie Jarrett: I did! I did, a long, long time ago now, it seems. But yeah, if Mayor Daley had not run for his last term, I was very seriously thinking about it. Of course, that was just at the time that President Obama decided to run for office, and so there was that tug. And even when he won his election, I considered throwing my hat in the ring to succeed him in the Senate. But he was very funny on that one, which he reminded me of lately. He said to me, look, I know the Senate, and I know what I'm prepared to offer you in the White House, and there's no choice. You have got to come to the White House. And he said to me not long ago, boy, was I right on that decision. Aren't you glad you're not a senator right now? And didn't we have just an extraordinary eight years in the White House? So yeah. (Laughs.)

Beverly Kirk: A couple of follow-ups to that. The Washington Post columnist Kathleen Parker wrote, I guess maybe a few weeks ago, that – wondering if you should be Joe Biden's running mate. Any thoughts on that? Do you still have the itch to run for office?

Valerie Jarrett: I don't. I don't. I'll tell you what I really find satisfying right now, Beverly, is just this. I love having conversations about the lessons that I've learned. I love supporting other people who are running for office. I know Vice President Biden really well. There's nothing I wouldn't do between now and November to be supportive of his candidacy. I think he'd be terrific for our country. And I know a lot of the women he's considering. He's got an embarrassment of riches from whom to choose. I talk to several of them frequently. I talk to the press about all of them because I think they're all really qualified and have excellent credentials.

And at this stage of my life, and I think life is made up of chapters. And I often say that, look, you know, people – can you have it all? Well, not in every chapter. And I think the question is, over the arc of your life as you look back do the chapters add up? And there are times in my life, like the eight years in the White House, where I worked harder than I've ever worked in my whole life. My daughter was in law school. I was single. I could afford to do that. It was that chapter. And there were chapters when she was younger where I would say to my mentor, look, I got to go home and put Laura to bed. I'll work after dinner, but I got to – this is what I have to do, as I learned to navigate for myself.

And so – and so in this chapter of my life – I became a grandmother a year ago.

Beverly Kirk: Congratulations.

Valerie Jarrett: Thank you. Best job in the world, I discovered. I thought being a mom was the best job, and then I became a grandma. And it's the coolest thing ever. I rented an apartment in New York so that I could be close to my daughter, and her husband, and my grandson. I love traveling. The book tour was much more fun than writing the book. The book was very painful. I had to do a lot of self-reflection and be prepared to be honest, and put yourself out there, and it's all in there. And I like to wake up every single morning, at this stage in my life, and I ask myself this question: What am I going to do today to lead a purposeful life? And I choose. And every day is different.

And I have associated myself with either corporate boards or not-for-profits that are true to my passion, where I feel like I can make a difference, and I can add value, and share the values of people who are running those organizations. And I can afford to pick and choose. And when you're in public service it's 24/7, as I said from that experience I had working in local government. And that's not the chapter I'm in right now.

Beverly Kirk: Well, thank you so much for spending time with us here in the Smart Women Smart Power speaker series today. Valerie Jarrett, thank you so much.

Valerie Jarrett: My pleasure, Beverly. Thank you. I loved our chat. And again, thank you to Candi and Kathleen, who I know are out there somewhere, for inviting me here. It's been a pleasure.

Beverly Kirk: An absolute pleasure. And thanks to all of you for joining us.

Valerie Jarrett: Bye-bye, now.

Beverly Kirk: Bye.

(END)