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ABSTRACT

In March 1993, Laubach Literacy Action (LLA) convened a nine-member women's focus group to identify barriers and issues that make it difficult for a woman to achieve her literacy goals. Six new readers and three program administrators participated. A brainstorming session identified an initial set of issues and/or barriers to women who want to improve their literacy skills: child care, transportation, women's work, violence, male attitudes, attitudes of family and friends, culture and tradition, class differences, self-esteem, fear of change, and isolation. The importance of recognizing special needs was also addressed. Women were identified as differing in literacy needs, age, geographical location, race, and marital status. LLA recommended that the following actions be taken by organizations that provide services and resources to women: provide child care and transportation; encourage critical reflection as part of literacy instruction; compensate for school experiences; promote research on women, for women, by women; encourage leadership development of women; develop instructional programs for women only; provide opportunities for women to use computers and other technology; offer diverse support services for women; train staff to work with women; develop cooperative or collaborative relationships; develop gender-sensitive instructional materials specifically for women; encourage advocacy for and by women; and seek funding and allocate resources for women. (Contains 11 references.) (YLB)

BY WOMEN / FOR WOMEN

A Beginning Dialogue on Women and Literacy in the United States

"It's easier for a woman to cross the threshold if there's another woman on the other side."

Focus Group Participant

LAUBACH LITERACY ACTION

Laubach Literacy is a non-profit adult literacy organization founded in 1955 by Dr. Frank C. Laubach. It currently works with literacy programs in 24 developing countries.

The United States program, Laubach Literacy Action, provides training and resources to more than 950 member groups nationwide. Laubach's national staff, state level organizations, volunteer consultants, and trainers help communities develop and expand literacy services. These programs use trained volunteers to provide basic literacy and English as a Second Language instruction to adults who seek these skills in order to make informed decisions about their lives.

"When women realize that they must depend wholly upon themselves, and organize as fully as though men did not exist, their drive against illiteracy will get on faster."

Dr. Frank C. Laubach

These words of Frank Laubach, founder of Laubach Literacy, are as true today as they were in 1936, when he made the observation. Despite his lifetime of literacy work and the millions of people who have been reached through the organization he founded, women are still struggling to achieve literacy: the "listening, speaking, reading, writing, and mathematics skills necessary to solve the problems one encounters in daily life; to take advantage of opportunities in one's environment; and to participate fully in the transformation of one's society."[1]

DEFINING THE PROBLEM OF WOMEN AND LITERACY

Throughout the world, women bear enormous responsibility for family health, child care and education, food preparation, and income generation. Women do two-thirds of the world's work, earn one-tenth of the world's income, and own less than one percent of the world's property. Worldwide, one out of three women cannot read or write.[2]

But this country is not without a similar problem. In the United States:

- An estimated 23 percent of all adult females have severely limited literacy skills, compared to 17 percent of all males.
- Seventy-five percent of female heads of household with less than a high school diploma live in poverty, compared with 34 percent of men who are in the same situation.
- Young women with below-average skills and below-poverty incomes are five-and-one-half times more likely to become teen parents.
- Nearly 40 percent of female single parents and 35 percent of displaced homemakers have an eighth-grade education or less.[3]

Literacy levels of children are strongly linked to those of their parents. Many believe that a child's future academic success can largely be attributed to the mother's literacy level. As the numbers of families headed by low-literate women increase, the cycle of illiteracy is perpetuated. It is evident that if women are to be economically independent and raise children with effective literacy skills, they must acquire the same skills.

HEARING WOMEN'S ISSUES FIRSTHAND

In the past two decades researchers have examined numerous issues — gender, male-female power struggles, violence, and questions of how women identify themselves — to determine the effect they have on women seeking to acquire literacy skills. Although the research is far from complete, the initial conclusion is that the impact of these issues on women seeking literacy is significant.

1 from Laubach Literacy International Mission Statement

2 International Labor Organization

3 Wider Opportunities for Women: "Women, Work, and Literacy" ERIC Digest No. 92

This confirms the findings of Laubach Literacy, which has been working with women in the developing world since 1955. In most communities where Laubach has established programs, women are the driving force behind their success. Because of the research done in North America and because of the role women have assumed internationally, Laubach Literacy, through its United States Program, Laubach Literacy Action (LLA), began to question how it could better meet the specific needs of women in this country.

To initiate this process LLA wanted to hear firsthand from women in literacy programs and women who are supervising literacy initiatives especially for women. In March 1993, LLA convened a nine-member women's focus group to identify barriers and issues that make it difficult for a woman — whether she is seeking basic skills or needs English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction — to achieve her literacy goals. The Women's Program of Coors "Literacy. Pass It On." funded the focus group.

The objectives of the one-day meeting were to:

- identify and discuss the barriers and issues that limit women's participation in literacy programs
- make recommendations about how these can be reduced or eliminated

Six new readers and three program administrators participated in the focus group. They ranged in age from 27 to 62, and represented diverse cultural, marital, racial, and socioeconomic groups. They came from rural and urban locations in eight states and included representatives from basic literacy and English as a Second Language programs.

A brainstorming session by the whole group identified an initial set of issues and/or barriers to women who want to improve their literacy skills. These included such factors as money, child care, transportation, poverty, and men's attitudes. Questions about racism, prejudice, and violence were introduced into the discussion as issues raised by sociological studies.

In order to validate the ideas summarized in this document, which is based on the focus group discussions, an earlier draft was sent to all focus group participants and to several practitioners. As a result, the following issues were identified as common to all.

- Child care
- Transportation
- Women's work
- Violence
- Male attitudes
- Attitudes of family and friends
- Culture and tradition
- Class differences
- Self-esteem and fear of change
- Isolation

"Who will watch my children?"

Obtaining child care is a primary hurdle for women to overcome when they seek assistance. Without on-site day care at a literacy program, women must rely on other sources of help. Looking to a male partner for assistance may not be a viable solution since many males refuse to supervise their own children. They may believe that the mother should not leave her children with anyone else because their care is her responsibility. Many women turn to female relatives for help, but women who are learning English as a Second Language may not have a family network in this country to help them.

Single women with children have even fewer choices. Hiring a qualified caregiver is an expensive option few of these women can afford. The complexities of finding adequate child care increase when school age children are home due to illness or school vacations.

Finding long-term child care is another problem. Neighbors or friends may be willing to babysit for free on a one-time or short-term basis, but six months or a year is another matter.

"How do I get to the literacy program?"

Transportation is another barrier. Unless the literacy program is within walking distance or has its own transportation network, women must rely on public transportation, drive themselves, or find a driver.

For married women, the husband's need for transportation to go to work often supersedes the wife's need to attend a literacy class. Public transportation to get to the literacy program is the usual solution. However, stresses one program coordinator, "It's hard to get on a bus with four children, drop them off at day care, go to the literacy program, study for an hour or two, and then pick up the children to go home — all by bus."

Relying on other people usually requires arranging two family schedules. But it might also mean that the new or prospective learner must first convince the person she is asking for help that the class is worthwhile when she herself may not yet be certain that this is true.

Like child care, transportation is needed over a long period of time. Taking the bus both ways — with children in tow — is an exhausting and potentially expensive ordeal if a woman must do it for several weeks or months. Furthermore, if these women have jobs outside the home, the pressures created from juggling so many different responsibilities may become overwhelming.

"Families, the house, the kids, and food all come first."

"Women's work" — that work which society expects women to do — can consume the entire day. Already coping with full-time child-rearing, housekeeping, and — frequently — additional out-of-the-home job responsibilities, women often find it difficult to schedule regular classes. Important outside study time is also very difficult to set aside.

Shopping for food, cooking, laundry, and housecleaning are daily time-consuming activities that usually fall to women, regardless of their cultural, marital, or economic background. One new learner sums up succinctly the thinking of women who frequently must place the needs of others before their own: "Families, the house, the kids, and food all come first. Then, if there's time, you can do something for yourself." Women who derive their primary identity from their caregiver role sometimes have difficulty in choosing to do something for themselves, and in getting others to support their decision.

"Being beaten until you're too embarrassed to go out the door is not uncommon."

Violence in both the family and the environment can also be a major barrier. Literacy programs are sometimes located in the midst of the neediest populations, where crime rates are high. In areas like these, women take physical risks just getting to the program. One coordinator, whose program straddles the border between two ethnically different neighborhoods, explains that the location makes it easier to serve both populations from a "center," but that it is an effort to cross through either neighborhood if a person is not a member of the dominant ethnic group.

Violence in the family, however, is the greater deterrent to women's participation. The group emphasized that in situations where women are beaten, the immediate result is that they stay home. It embarrasses them to go outside with black eyes and other bruises. Their sense of self-worth is diminished. Their fear increases. "Women in shelters are afraid that if they come to us," explains a program coordinator, "the man will find them. Because the shelter is a 'safe' house, we can't go to them."

"Men are afraid that if we women can depend on ourselves, we will leave them behind."

Male attitudes greatly influence the behavior of women. Men often question the value of education for women and argue that cooking, cleaning, and child care do not require reading or writing skills. The attitude that "I take care of business things; she doesn't need to worry about them" is also prevalent.

Domestic relationships — regardless of marital status, geographical location, race, or age — greatly influence women who want to attend a literacy program but have a difficult time walking in the door. If the "man" doesn't believe in the value of literacy, or if "power" is an issue, a woman's own fear of failure may be too great for her to challenge a mate's decision.

Power and control issues are played out when the man agrees that literacy is desirable, but puts up such blocks as taking the car, refusing to watch the children, insisting that laundry and ironing be done first, or interfering with studying.

Violence toward women does not exist in a vacuum, but is entwined in issues of male self-esteem, power, and control. One new reader in the focus group said that battering occurs because men suffer from low self-esteem. "They take their own fears out on us," she said. This led into a discussion of men's needs, which the group understood and expressed concern about. One learner refocused everyone instantly, however, with her quiet comment, "Before we worry about the men, we have to do something for ourselves."

"We like you just the way you are."

Attitudes of family and friends also have a powerful effect on women learners. Children, fearful that their mother will no longer pay attention to them, become more demanding or create distractions to prevent her from studying or going to class. "Where are you going? Why are you going?" are frequent questions. Finding out that their mother has other interests may cause children to become resentful, and this feeling can replace their initial sense of pride in their mother's accomplishments.

Friends may say, "We're O.K. the way we are. Why do you want to be different?" They question the woman's motives. The message "you think you're better than we are" is incentive not to change.

"I feel the choice is literacy or my family."

Culture and tradition are among the first issues to clash head-on with white, middle-class society. One new reader explained that to prevent "breaking up the family," she remained in an abusive situation. "In the Hispanic culture," she said, "family is very important." But she told her husband that he could not beat her anymore. "He is changing," she said. "Things are getting better."

In many cultures women don't attend school at all or, if they do, they are taken out of school early to work at home. The ultimate result is that only males receive an education. Given this background, both men and women from such cultures have difficulty in understanding the need to educate females.

An ESL program coordinator notes that not only do literacy programs make little effort to incorporate the new learner's culture into her studies, but that "American ideals" appear to attack traditional values. "For example, ethnic women who leave abusive husbands and go to a shelter often return home," she says. "To them, the shelter is uncomfortable because it is such an American concept."

But women who were born and raised in this country may also come from traditions that leave them facing the same conflicts. They must sometimes make the same choice — literacy or family. After six weeks of assuming extra responsibilities and getting less attention, mates may become irritated at the inconveniences they face, and after six months, their tolerance disappears. In addition, a new learner's own patience may be tested if she feels she isn't learning enough or learning fast enough.

"It's hard to walk into a classroom when you have holes in your shoes."

Class is an issue. Literacy programs, and many other organizations that provide services to women, frequently reflect the predominant white, middle-class culture in design, materials, and staffing. One new reader commented, "They are all white women in that office." In describing her clients, a program coordinator said, "All they want to do is watch the soaps and collect their monthly checks." These remarks underscore the reality of how culture and tradition affect our thinking, and can put us at odds with each other, despite the best of intentions.

For the focus group, concerns about appearance pointed to the complex relationships between class expectations, self-esteem, and attitudes of family and friends. Literacy leaders may say, "Don't worry about your clothes," but American society sends out far different signals, which women interpret as: "I don't look like everybody else. I can't do things like other people. Therefore, I am less capable."

Through the pervasiveness of media and the initial reactions of people toward others who dress differently, women learn quickly what is acceptable to white, middle-class society. The literacy program must be sensitive to this issue — and others — in making a "match" between learner and tutor. Appropriate clothing can help to neutralize cultural and class differences between tutor and learner. This means that literacy program staff and tutors must think about how they dress, so as not to unnecessarily intimidate students.

The group pointed out that lack of money is only one thing that affects how women dress. Women are also sometimes caught in a double bind, between society's expectations and their family's perceptions. "Where are you going all dressed up?" or "Why are you painting your face?" are common questions from both husbands and children. Whether it is the children asking, due to their anxiety about losing their mother's attention, or whether it is from men because of power issues, these questions do affect women's behavior and how they dress.

A child's question may cause a woman to feel guilty, but the same question from a man has a more direct effect. "Women learn to dress down," notes a program coordinator, "because their husbands are jealous. We've had men call the center and ask for their wives. The men are checking up on them."

"No one ever clapped for me in my life."

Lack of self-esteem and fear of change may be the greatest barriers women face. Many question whether or not they are capable of learning to read. And, "What will my life be like if I do learn to read?" is the literacy equivalent of the old cliche "It's easier to live with the devils you know than the ones you don't."

"Will my husband resent me because I can read and he can't? Will my husband be threatened? Will he get violent, or leave me because I'm too uppity?" These are real fears for women who know their "place" in the family, even if they don't like it.

Society conditions many women to expect failure. Change is difficult for those who expect little support or encouragement for their efforts to alter their lives. Afraid to try, and lacking a history of success to fall back on, women worry that failing will prove that it was wrong, stupid, or useless to have tried in the first place. Society reinforces these feelings of insecurity and inadequacy in many ways. In their childhood experiences with school, women may have been "taught" that they are not capable of academic learning — just because they are women. A literacy group for women can give them an opportunity to experience success. It can become one place where they are valued for themselves; where their learning achievements are applauded; where their sense of worth can be reconstructed.

"There's nobody to talk to."

Physical and emotional isolation are not uncommon conditions for many women. Along with child-rearing responsibilities, several factors in women's lives keep them separated from other people. For example, to avoid incurring male jealousy some women do not associate with people beyond their immediate families. Sometimes, because of their neighborhood, women simply do not feel safe outside their own homes. The subsequent feelings of loneliness and the sense of isolation are intangible barriers that women must also overcome. "Feeling alone" can immobilize women — whether it is the result of environmental, societal, or personal situations.

Whether the rationale is, "You don't talk about things like that," or that women are embarrassed to reveal family problems such as battering, alcoholism, or illiteracy, the result is the same: secrets create a wall separating women from the very people who could help them. That isolation is intensified when women are forbidden or are afraid to go beyond the confines of their homes for safety reasons — or because they fear the unknown of the world around them. Yet, without having other women to talk to, they lack a crucial external source of information, support, and motivation.

If a woman is not able to establish an emotional support network to help her through the rough days, it can be difficult for her to maintain interest and enthusiasm for staying in a literacy program. This can be particularly difficult for ESL learners who may not have any extended family living in this country, and for whom the language barrier is particularly isolating.

RECOGNIZING SPECIAL NEEDS

Women are not a homogenous group. They differ in literacy needs, age, geographical location, race, and marital status and may have additional specialized issues with which to contend. Women may "postpone" improving their reading because more immediate problems, such as addiction to drugs (including alcohol), overshadow the need for literacy skills. Peer pressure is also a problem, particularly with younger women who must often choose between literacy and spending time with friends.

Older women also have a unique set of issues. These range from a feeling of "I'm too old to learn" from those who are reluctant to enter a program, to "the work is too hard and the pace is too fast" from women who have been in a program for a longer time. Health is another issue prevalent among older women. Illness and other physical limitations, such as failing eyesight or reduced mobility, affect a woman's attitude about the importance of literacy as well as her ability to concentrate on the learning process.

ESL women find that the absence of bilingual assistance may be an impenetrable barrier for those who do not speak or understand any English. This inability to communicate, coupled with racial or cultural differences, can make it too uncomfortable for them to continue, and they may drop out after a few weeks.

Racism, prejudice, class distinction, money, or a lack of motivation can also be barriers to many people. Gender issues join with these factors to complicate matters for women. While the focus group did not deal with them directly, these sensitive subjects were not ignored. Class prejudice surfaced, but it was not given a name. People discussed being uncomfortable about their appearance. They were also ill at ease with their way of speaking because they were judged by it. They implied, but never described, these feelings as class prejudice.

Two Hispanic women spoke about having their English pronunciation ridiculed. Another new learner mentioned the treatment she received at a social service agency. The social worker didn't hesitate to interrupt the interview to answer co-workers' questions or take phone calls. The learner felt her race made her "unimportant" to the person who was supposed to be helping her.

DECIDING WHAT TO DO

Laubach Literacy is struggling to understand how the differences between men and women affect the quality of education women receive. The important factor is not sex, which is a physical, biological difference. It is gender — the expectations people have from others because they are male or female.

Men are expected to be stronger. They are expected to assume professional roles and to be leaders. Women are expected to be weaker physically and emotionally. They are expected to become mothers or teachers or assume other "helping" roles. Women receive lower wages than men. They seldom receive promotions into top management. They face the threat of violence from men. They are not usually found in positions of decision-making in their communities.

All of these societal assumptions about women place the heaviest burden on those with the fewest skills and little understanding of how to improve their situations. The values and power structures that maintain those gender expectations discussed by the focus group will not suddenly change. That change will happen gradually on many fronts. Literacy can help women dream a different life. It can help them change not just themselves, but the communities in which those new selves can flourish.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the work of the focus group, researchers, and discussion with others in the literacy field, Laubach Literacy Action recommends that the following actions be taken by organizations that provide services and resources to women, especially those who need to improve their literacy skills.

Provide child care and transportation. If women are to have access to literacy instruction, these services must be recognized as necessary elements of a successful program. One agency represented in the focus group faced severe downsizing of its women's program because transportation funds had been cut.

Encourage critical reflection as part of literacy instruction. Women, both learners and literacy providers, need to think analytically about their lives and the commonalities between their experiences and those of other women. If literacy is to be a tool for change, women need support and opportunities to question their situation. They need to see themselves and their relationships in new ways, and to take greater control over their lives. Programs can use learner-centered curricula to help women see new possibilities for themselves rather than training them to accept society's stereotypical views that women are emotional, intuitive, and not as capable of abstract thought as men.

Compensate for school experiences. Studies have shown that female children in school settings are shortchanged. They have fewer opportunities for leadership; fewer chances to respond to teachers; less encouragement to tackle science, math, and technological subjects; and lower expectations of themselves because of teachers' attitudes. Literacy programs can give women the opportunity to counteract these experiences and be successful in a learning environment. Women need to experience equality. The literacy program can provide a collaborative, supportive atmosphere that counteracts messages of women's subordinate position.

Promote research on women, for women, by women. Women need to understand the outside issues and forces that make women's lives complex. Literacy providers can enable women to identify those issues and help them assess their own personal needs. With this information, women can address those needs without feeling they are the total cause of the problems they face.

Encourage leadership development of women. "We need to see women supporting themselves. We need women to teach us how to do that. And then we will be able to teach others," emphasizes one new reader. The makeup of a literacy program's staff and volunteers needs to reflect the makeup of the learners in the program. For more women to cross the thresholds of our programs they need to see women like themselves, who are Latina, African-American, Native American, or Asian. National organizations that provide services to women can organize national/regional conferences for such women to help them develop leadership skills. Literacy programs and other service

providers can give them a voice in how the program operates by inviting them to serve on boards, committees, and task forces. Their contribution can enrich the decision-making of these groups, by bringing in the perspective of the woman learner.

Develop instructional programs for women only. Literacy programs can establish women-only programming in addition to their regular schedule. Existing women's groups can develop literacy programs for their members or clients. Women in the community who are not being served also need to be identified, and specialized recruitment and support services offered to them. Small group instruction is an option for programs to consider. It can reduce feelings of isolation and help women build support networks.

A conscious effort to undo the stereotypes and social patterns that prevent individual and social development is a crucial component in all women's groups. Instructional methods and materials that address women's interests and needs are also essential. Model programs need to be developed and promoted. Programs need to become part of a larger network to share resources and expertise. A resource book of other programs doing women-centered work could be a valuable tool.

Provide opportunities for women to use computers and other forms of technology. This will help them work independently and at times that fit their schedules. It will help them develop employment skills. Women comprise over 50 percent of the workforce. The statistics cited earlier in this report clearly indicate that many of these women are educationally disadvantaged.

Offer diverse support services to women. Social events can help women create support networks and involve the family in their educational program. Women's support groups can be a forum for discussion. Events that highlight female learners' successes offer positive female role models. Seminars at existing conferences on how to meet the needs of women give others an opportunity to learn what can be accomplished.

It is important to remember that a woman's education and development are legitimate ends in themselves. The positive changes that occur within the family are a beneficial side effect, not necessarily the primary goal.

Train staff to work with women. Staff should receive cultural awareness and sensitivity training so that stereotypical views of ethnic groups are not reflected in their interactions with women clients. Understanding other cultural norms is important. One program director, who works in a large, culturally diverse program, cautions that staff must be careful not to unintentionally put a woman in jeopardy. Encouraging behaviors of independence that are in opposition to her community — without knowing the individual woman's situation — may lead to greater violence against her.

Staff must also learn how to ask questions that elicit needs rather than just explain the services available. "Many women don't know what to ask for," notes one program coordinator. "And, though difficult, the staff must respond with recommendations versus solutions, because it is up to the client to make decisions." Bilingual staff and access to people in the community who can serve as interpreters are essential. A system that pairs the non-English speaker with a bilingual ally is another worthwhile option.

Develop cooperative or collaborative relationships with other providers who serve significant numbers of women. It is essential that social service, health care, and other agencies learn to identify the specific needs of women who lack literacy skills. Literacy program staff and tutors need to be aware of services available to women learners.

These include social service assistance, displaced homemakers programs, child protection, health clinics, protection from domestic violence, job training programs, and women's support groups. Learners who are "battling bureaucracy" need assistance from staff in finding and receiving the community services they need.

Develop gender-sensitive instructional materials specifically for women. Materials used by the program must promote non-racist and non-sexist values. This includes being sensitive to the fact that while being a mother may be one of a woman's primary functions, women should not be exclusively defined by that role. Publishers of adult basic education materials need to develop products that reflect women's diverse needs and interests. They not only need information that will help them in daily life, but reading material about women's goals and achievements. Focus group participants stated that they wanted to hear about ordinary women like themselves, not just famous women. They also recommended books written by new readers to provide "hope and motivation." Bilingual materials, the group emphasized, are crucial for ESL women.

Encourage advocacy for and by women. Legislation that will help strengthen women's participation in literacy programs must receive support. Women's issues are embedded in much of the legislation for education, labor, and health and human services. These need to be acknowledged and supported. Women who are new readers can receive encouragement and training that will enable them to speak out on these issues.

The focus group members verified from their personal experiences that women are not always treated with the same respect as men. Men receive far fewer questions regarding their personal situation than women do when they are dealing with social service agencies, according to members of the focus group. According to them, women's questions often go unanswered and their phone calls are not returned. Women can learn how to counteract this gender discrimination.

Locate offices and programs in "safe" locations. It is helpful if programs can be in close proximity to women's homes, jobs, or other places to which women already go for other services. This will reduce anxiety, travel time, and transportation problems. It may also encourage them to keep their appointments. Some women are also concerned about privacy. Offices and learning centers need to be located where women can go without feeling embarrassed by being seen and recognized.

Seek funding and allocate resources for women. Literacy organizations must take a proactive and practical approach to raising funds specifically to help recruit and retain women as literacy students, and to underwrite the cost of materials development. National literacy organizations and organizations that support literacy or control funding should make local programs aware of funding opportunities and resources available to them.

CONCLUSION

A letter from one of the participants reveals clearly why it is important for women to get together to discuss literacy. In telling what she gained from being in the focus group, she underscores the changes that can occur in a woman's thinking and her life if she gains literacy skills and has support in making decisions.

> *"Well, I got home in one piece! I wanted to tell you thank you for inviting me. I had the greatest time, considering I haven't been out of my hometown and on my own or on a plane.*
>
> *"I learned a lot from all of you and I made new friends. I never really knew that there were people like me. What I liked the most was that there was no color, but just women united as one.*
>
> *"I am sending you a picture of my family so you can see why I never left my abusive marriage. I love my children and I don't want to leave them behind. I want them to go forward with me, and as long as we all try together we can succeed.*
>
> *"You all have given me greater confidence to keep pushing forward. Thank you very much for accepting me. It was the experience of a lifetime. Good luck, and keep working toward the cause. I will keep working also."*

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