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**Head of the Civil Rights Division Vanita Gupta Delivers Remarks at White House
Convening on Advancing Equity for Women and Girls of Color**
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Thank you, Leteria [Bailey], for that kind introduction. And thank you all for your tireless efforts and strong leadership to support women and girls of color across America. I want to recognize a few of my outstanding colleagues we just heard from: [Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights at the Department of Education] Catherine Lhamon, [Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Justice Programs] Karol Mason, [Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council] Cecilia Muñoz, [Director of the Women's Bureau at the Department of Labor] Latifa Lyles and [Deputy Assistant Secretary for Minority Health at the Department of Health and Human Services] Nadine Gracia. Across the Obama Administration, we all believe that empowering girls *today* – providing them a seat at the table and defending their civil rights – will help our country reach its full potential *tomorrow*. How we treat women and girls of color, how we lift each other up and how we inspire one another changes lives. It strengthens families. And it transforms communities.

As a woman of color myself, I learned this lesson early on, like so many of you, from my family. My grandmother, one of the smartest women I know, was fiercely independent. And she advocated passionately for the education of her daughters and granddaughters. Her faith in me changed my life and shaped my career. Even as she grew up in a world that denied women around the globe the most basic freedoms – a world that, in many countries, still does – she had the courage and ambition to envision a brighter future. When I look out at this room, I feel that same courage. For despite the obstacles, we all aspire to build a brighter future – a future where we see the imperfections and inequities, but we keep striving – to remove artificial limits and discriminatory barriers that diminish opportunities and derail dreams. For the past two-plus years, I've had the privilege of a lifetime to lead the Civil Rights Division's work in building that brighter future, together with you, for every girl and every woman in our country. And I got to do it alongside a team of extraordinary women, from our Attorney General, to our Deputy Attorney General, alongside Karol and Catherine and Cecilia and so many others responsible for defending the security of our country and vindicating the rights of the most vulnerable among us.

At America's founding – and for many decades after – our Constitution denied women and African Americans the right to vote. Not that long ago, courts sanctioned state-sponsored discrimination – from schools, to restaurants, to bathrooms – based on the color of your skin. But *today* in America, a woman of color, a bold and visionary leader, Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch, serves as our chief law enforcement officer. Of course, success stories alone cannot erase systemic injustices. They cannot eradicate profound inequities. But they do give me faith in America's capacity for progress – the notion that we can march forward, imperfectly but unyieldingly, to build a more inclusive, more just and more free union. And they give me hope that together we can advance the cause of justice. For too many women and girls of color today, the cause of justice feels distant and out of reach. And so all of us must work to identify and combat the unique barriers facing women and girls of color around the country – barriers that too often deny them the rights our Constitution guarantees and the opportunities they deserve.

Advancing justice starts with our children. It requires desegregating schools and implementing *Brown v. Board of Education*. Because as the Supreme Court ruled more than six decades ago, “A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn.” Sadly, the vestiges of racial segregation in education still exist today. Far too many children still attend racially-segregated schools and live in racially-isolated neighborhoods. And in school, we know that girls of color suffer particular harms from the intersection of discrimination based on race and gender. The Civil Rights Division continues to monitor 175 school desegregation cases to make the promise of *Brown v. Board* real for all of America’s children. Earlier this year, following a five-decade-long desegregation battle in Cleveland, Mississippi – a city divided literally by railroad tracks that separate east from west and black from white – a federal court ordered the school district to consolidate its secondary schools. And last year, we reached an agreement with Huntsville, Alabama, to desegregate its public schools, improve access to quality course offerings and address racial discrimination in student discipline, among other areas. In her opinion, U.S. District Judge Madeleine Hughes Haikala [of the Northern District of Alabama] spoke directly to the students, saying, “The district believes in you and in your potential for success. ... Think about how much the City of Huntsville will benefit from the contributions that you will make in the years ahead as teachers and engineers, as doctors and lawyers, as artists and musicians.”

Advancing justice also requires combating discriminatory school discipline practices, which disproportionately harm children of color – particularly girls of color – and children with disabilities. Too often, discriminatory discipline practices fuel the school-to-prison pipeline. And when young people end up serving time behind bars, rather than earning diplomas and landing jobs, that hurts us all. We’ve seen this tragic chain of events play out around the country. We saw it in Meridian, Mississippi, where we found students suspended from school – and some later incarcerated in a juvenile detention facility – simply for violating the dress code by wearing the wrong color socks or leaving their shirts untucked. We saw it in Palm Beach County, Florida, the nation’s 11th-largest school district, where language barriers placed children with limited English proficiency at risk of unfair suspensions or encounters with school police officers. And we saw it in Watson Chapel, Arkansas, where overly punitive and ineffective discipline practices prevented students of color from reaching their full potential. In each of these cases, and so many others, the Civil Rights Division monitors robust settlement agreements to ensure that children get to spend their time learning and growing, not stuck in the juvenile justice system for routine disciplinary matters.

For those children who do end up in the juvenile justice system, we ensure that they receive the full due process and equal protection rights our Constitution guarantees. From Tennessee, to Texas, to Missouri, the Civil Rights Division has led investigations and reached settlements to reform local juvenile justice systems. Just two days ago, we reached a settlement with the St. Louis County Family Court, which among other measures, will reduce racial disparities that result at different stages of the local juvenile justice system. We also brought transformative change to Ohio’s juvenile corrections system by ending punitive solitary confinement and advancing mental health care. These reforms went beyond mere policy shifts. They changed attitudes. They built confidence. And they helped kids reach their full potential. As Savanna, one of the girls in the state’s juvenile correctional facilities explained, “When I get home I know I’m going to be able to use my new thought process because it feels so much better than doing what I used to do.”

In policing, the Civil Rights Division’s work continues to vindicate the rights of vulnerable women. From Missoula, Montana, to New Orleans, Louisiana – from college campuses to city streets – we’ve worked to prevent sexual assault and address the harm of gender bias in policing. In New Orleans, for instance, we found that officers wrongly arrested transgender women for prostitution and then charged them under the state’s “crimes against nature” law. Multiple convictions under this law forced them to register as sex offenders, hurting their chances of landing a job or finding a home. Following lessons learned through our work with police departments across the country, last year we released new guidance that aims to help state and local law enforcement agencies address harmful stereotypes and bias based on one’s gender, gender identity, sexual orientation or race that can undermine their response to sexual assault and domestic violence. Biases and stereotypes across multiple bases – including gender and race – exacerbate the harm. No civilized society can ever afford to look the other way when men abuse women – whether at home or on the job. Our common humanity demands that we respond, that we speak out and that we act.

The Civil Rights Division works to empower women of color in our economy, too, by promoting the timeless American ideal that says if you work hard, if you play by the rules and if you follow the law, you deserve an equal chance to succeed. Our fair lending work – where we protect the rights of people to borrow money and access credit free from discrimination – changes lives. A consent decree we reached with Wells Fargo created a program called CityLIFT. After Monica couldn't buy a home for her family and lost her deposit, she felt like she "had lost everything." But once she learned about CityLIFT, which provides down payment assistance grants, she used the program to fulfill her dream and buy a home. As Monica explained, "I needed for my children to know they can do anything, and for my mother to know she's done well." We also vindicate the rights of women in employment. We address discriminatory hiring practices that hold women back from pursuing their dreams and advancing their careers. We combat pregnancy discrimination in the workplace, because no woman should ever have to choose between raising a family and earning a salary. And we prevent pay discrimination, because all women deserve equal pay for equal work. When they don't get the wages they deserve, businesses, working families and entire communities suffer.

Now I want to speak directly to all the young women in the room, as well as those around the country. The stories I just spoke about and the cases I just highlighted describe the impact of the Civil Rights Division's efforts. But government agencies alone do not guarantee the success of our collective cause. Advancing the cause of justice and fulfilling America's founding promise of equal opportunity, justice and protection for all depends on your leadership. Because I can assure you, you will come across moments in your life when you feel afraid, when you feel nervous about the unknown, when you feel uncertain about what the future will bring – and you will ask yourself: do I belong here? Do I belong in this job? In this school? In this program? In this community? Will my peers and my colleagues accept me for whom I love, who I am, how I look or where I pray?

Let me leave the girls and young women in this room with just two words of advice – whenever you find yourself, or others, doubting and questioning whether you can rise to the challenge and realize the dreams you set: remember that you absolutely can. Let me reassure all of you – gay and straight, white and black, Latino and Asian, Muslim and Jewish, Christian and Hindu – your voice and leadership matter now more than ever. Don't let anyone ever make you believe anything else. Even when other people in implicit, quiet ways tell you to know your place, do not stay silent. Our country needs your voices and we need your ideas. I know that a lot of you may be feeling uncertain and anxious. But this work has never been easy. You all in this room embody resilience. And you give our country hope. Hope gives us the struggle and the struggle gives us hope. It's the hope that this work transforms the nation, fulfills dreams and changes lives.

With all of you here in this room, I know we will keep on doing extraordinary things in the years ahead. And especially to the young women in the room, we're counting on you.