

Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn
Keynote Remarks
DC Chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners
2015 Annual Banquet
McLean, VA
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Thank you, Ms. (Debrah) Farnell, for that gracious introduction. Congratulations on your election as President, and hats off to Mina Fies, for such a successful term.

I am honored that an association of women entrepreneurs invited me to take part in this year's banquet, because before I became a utility regulator, I ran a small weekly newspaper in Charleston, South Carolina. Like you, I experienced the joys of producing a product that, I felt, made a difference in people's lives. And like you, I had a front row seat to many of the challenges not uncommon to entrepreneurs, women entrepreneurs in particular – who often struggle to compete against more established giants. Running a business was, to quote a cliché, the “hardest job I ever loved,” for this calling is not for the faint of heart.

But the members of the National Association of Women Business Owners, for the past 40 years, remain undaunted, and have helped women overcome many of these challenges, by sharing resources and providing a single voice to shape economic and public policy. Because of this, we are seeing tremendous growth in the numbers of women-owned businesses in the district. From 1997-2014, DC experienced a 61% increase in the number of women-owned firms, and a 176% growth in women-owned firm revenues, ranking it #1 overall in those categories among states. In 2014, there were 206,400 women-owned firms in the DC area, ranking it 6th overall among metropolitan areas.

That's the good news, and what is even greater to report, is that what is happening in DC is not unique. Nationwide, more than 9.1 million firms are owned by women. They employ nearly 7.9 million people, and are generating \$1.4 trillion in sales as of 2014. But what we cannot ignore is the fact that many of the challenges and biases women faced 40 years ago, are still with us today.

This unfortunate reality triggered a memory of some well-meaning advice shared with me by an acquaintance, right after I assumed office almost six years ago. “Mignon,” the person said – and yes, it was a she – “please do not just focus on women's, children's and family issues.”

I was not especially stunned by her plea, understood her reasoning, and for better or worse, took her advice to heart to the point where I may have sidestepped advocating some issues which, and this was her fear, would have boxed me into some "soft issue" bubble. But part of me felt uncomfortable about how conscious I was about taking this course. I would be once again confronted by this dilemma as I listened to a news radio story recently. The reporter and the female tech developers spoke about how women entrepreneurs, in this case in Silicon Valley, tend to be either ignored or marginalized. Investors start out with preconceived notions that these innovators, because they are women, are going to pitch ideas that will only target women and children and even when they are wrong, their ideas too often are not well received and when it comes to angel or other forms of investment, they are either shortchanged or ignored.

But what I should have embraced and defended from day one, what I should have been boastful and very un-apologetic about, is that there is absolutely nothing wrong with being an advocate or singularly targeting and serving a women-centric market. Women entrepreneurs should not be shy or coy about highlighting or embracing our unique perspectives, for if it is line with our business model, we have

the ability and the advantage, to identify innovative business opportunities too often overlooked by our male counterparts.

What I knew then, but am more empowered by your mission, energy and support, is the fact that we are stronger when we except and embrace those “differences” – be they race, gender, disability – because is a part of what make us who we are, and where there are barriers that remain because of these "differences," we should continue in our quest to overcome them... together.

Like many of you, I know what it is to be underestimated, under-appreciated and misunderstood. When I was appointed Acting Chair of the FCC, many concluded that I would be a mere bench warmer, accepting the title and the perks, but hanging out until the permanent appointee assumed the post. But like many of you, being underestimated, under-appreciated and misunderstood just causes me to shift into this highly motivated, hyper-driven state – where I do as much as I can for as long as I am able. We ended up being widely praised during those months when we managed the agency, because what was key among my initiatives, were our efforts to ensure that the government, our agency, will go the extra mile to make a difference, in the lives of men, women and children who are currently on the wrong side of the digital divide. My goal is to bridge what is a widening affordability gap, because I know that leveraging the power of 21st century information, communications and technology will spur innovation and opportunities in all communities.

I understand that your theme this year is “Connections.” Let me just say today that we could not be more in sync, particularly when it comes to my work at the Commission which is critical to ensuring that all people have the connectivity needed to succeed in today’s world:

No doubt you heard, that earlier this year, we adopted the Open Internet Order. Now why should you care? Because what this means, is that your business' website, and the customers visiting your website, will be treated in the same way as those using the website of your largest, most well-funded, competitor. Your internet services provider will not be allowed to make your competitors websites load faster or function better than yours. This is critical, because your businesses need to reach the largest customer base possible, and that the internet is increasingly the tool which enables that to happen.

As important is the fact the Open Internet Order ensures that you have access to the news and information and social networking that you may need to build your contacts, stay abreast of trends, and gain access to free and the lowest-cost tools available on-line. Those of us who voted to support the Order have and will continue to take some heat, but I firmly believe this approach is in the best interest of the people we have pledged to serve, including the small and medium-sized business owners in this room.

What exactly is the Open Internet? To me, it symbolizes core democratic values of free speech we hold dear, and a level playing field for fair competition. What too often gets lost in the debate is that for almost a decade, the FCC has had policies or rules in place, that have enabled consumers to access whatever lawful content on the Internet that they wanted. This means consumers determine which content to access and which website or app to visit and that companies, providers, could not block such access or degrade such content.

So, in May of last year, we launched a process to seek comment on adopting new rules. The court’s decision provided the FCC with a unique opportunity to take a fresh look at the FCC’s rules with the benefit of hindsight, evaluate how the industry has changed, and ask what the appropriate policies are.

The response to our proceeding was overwhelming – over 3.7 million people filed comments. This is practically unheard of at an agency that I refer to as the most powerful agency you probably never

heard of... until there is a wardrobe malfunction on television or an extremely verbally colorful shock jock on the radio.

The public's response highlights the ubiquity and importance of the Internet in our daily lives. I venture to guess that many in this room are using social media right now, or are checking their email, but they may also be controlling the temperature of their house, paying bills, ordering dinner or connecting with their government representatives all while – intently, no doubt – listening to my remarks. The internet is everywhere, and that is one reason why people are so concerned about keeping it free and open.

But, what this intense, expensive and protracted debate has made clear to me, is that the Internet is the great equalizer of our time. It does not matter who you are, how much money you have, or where you are from; your chosen or presumed demographic does not determine if a new app will be successful or not. The Internet has broken down traditional barriers, allowing good ideas to flourish and fledgling businesses to compete on equal terms with those who have deep pockets. It allows consumers to determine which ideas will become successful. Now that is empowering.

A story of a woman I met last year, really underscores the importance of the Internet and the power of a good idea. I had the opportunity to meet a young African American writer named Issa Rae, who shared with me how an open and free Internet has changed her life.

You see, she had an idea for a new television series, but was repeatedly told no ... that there was no audience interested in her content. She knew that she had a great idea, pursued her passion, produced her own content herself, posted it on YouTube, and in a relatively short period of time, millions of viewers proved her right.

And the last time I checked, she was developing her own pilot for HBO.

And I cannot leave without speaking about universal broadband access. That is, ensuring that every American has access to the internet, broadband that they can afford, and skills on how to use it. As entrepreneurs, you know how important this is, but as women, it is especially important because how many of us could be successful without access to online tools. Even more, how many innovative products are being developed today, or could be developed tomorrow, if every woman (and man, and child) had access to broadband? I am convinced that there are diseases that go untreated today because the solutions are locked in the brain of that woman who is currently on the wrong side of the digital divide. Am I right Linda?

But we can change all of this. Congressional mandates state that we should change this. And that's why, as Acting Chair, I launched an effort to reform the Lifeline program. Unfortunately, this critical program which connects low-income consumers to basic communications service, has been under attack. While like any program, there were issues, the level of criticism the program has received is not entirely justified. In its 30-year history, the program has been vulnerable to some waste, fraud and abuse. But the reforms we launched in 2011 have borne tremendous fruit.

But there is much more left to do. PEW reports that approximately 30% of Americans are without at-home access to broadband. And as we've discussed today – broadband is not a luxury, it is a necessity. It is a must if we are to be informed and educated, it is a must if we are to manage our money, our health, or remain connected with friends and colleagues, here and across the world. So I'm proud that last week, the FCC launched a proceeding to seek comment from the public on how to improve the Lifeline program so we can do a dramatically better job at providing access to 21st century communications to people on the wrong side of the affordability gap.

A rebooted 21st century Lifeline program, which focuses on ensuring that both voice and broadband services are affordable, could be one of the best investments our government ever makes. For \$9.25 a month, consumers can improve their lives, find a job, stay in touch with loved ones, enroll and take classes, monitor their health and maintain connection with doctors, engage in their communities, and participate in e-commerce. If done right, the program could bridge divides and the network effects of a modernized program could be tremendous.

We need to reset and retarget not only Lifeline's operations, but also our mindset about the program. Lifeline is meant to be a temporary bridge for those most in need. Indeed, the program's actual goal should be for it to work so effectively that current subscribers will no longer need Lifeline, or any other federal benefits program, because we have created a successful program that meets the information and technology needs of those who qualify. These new connections to the digital economy could hold the key to turning these consumers' lives around.

But if there is one thought that was emphasized repeatedly today, and is reflected through the life and legacy of this year's nominees--congratulations El, is that women entrepreneurs are making a difference in a world that still does not fully understand the value of our products or our presence. But what is most important, is that we do. The experts estimate the buying power of women between five and 15 trillion dollars a year. Wherever that number lies along that spectrum, that's significant. And that's not all. Experts also indicate that women will control two-thirds of the consumer wealth in the US over the next decade and be the beneficiaries of the largest wealth transfer in our country's history. Your future customers, your future business partners, the inventors of the next great business idea – include women on both sides of the digital divide. I urge you, as you think about the policy issues that impact your businesses, to pay attention to what happens at agencies like the FCC. We are involved in issues that have a real impact.

Thank you for inviting me here and allowing me to present these remarks. I wish you a successful conclusion to your annual banquet.