

**REMARKS OF
CHAIRWOMAN JESSICA ROSENWORCEL
THE GRACE HOPPER CELEBRATION
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Good morning! Let me start by saying this is amazing. The Grace Hopper Celebration is known for being the world's premier networking event for women in technology. It is great to see it and just be here. Because in my two decades of working on technology policy, I have not been in a lot of rooms like this. In fact, I have lost count of the times that I have been the only woman in the room.

So in preparing my thoughts for this event, dozens of stories came to mind about what it's like to be the only woman in the room or at the table—because I've got some doozies.

There are the inspired episodes, like the time I sat down with women start-up founders at an incubator and learned about the “tribes” they built for personal and professional support. Or the conversations I had with women in technology on a podcast I called “Broadband Conversations” where they shared their personal histories and advice.

Then there are the less-than-inspired reminders that the number of women in technology is too few, like when I spoke at an international spectrum conference. The room was packed with hundreds of engineering and wireless experts and the conversation on stage crackled with energy. When it was over, I deposited my microphone in a heap of stage electronics and headed off to use the facilities. I found a long line, a queue to get into the bathroom—the men's bathroom. The women's bathroom was totally empty. I marched right in. Or then there was the time when I was negotiating with a colleague. It was the final session in a series of discussions, you know, the one where the deal gets made or it all falls apart. He came to my office and sat down in the chair across from me, and after exchanging the kind of pleasantries you offer at the start, sighed and said: “It must be so hard for you to do this job as a mom.” I smiled and offered no response. But in my head, it was batten down the hatches, I am not leaving this room until I get everything I want and then some. Rest assured, I did.

But instead of talking some more about these greatest hits, let me start at the very beginning. My name is Jessica Rosenworcel. I am the first woman confirmed to lead the Federal Communications Commission in our Nation's history. It took 87 years to do it. So I am going to make up for lost time.

I was born in Massachusetts and lived in Southern Illinois and Northern New Jersey when I was young, though I spent the bulk of my childhood in Hartford, Connecticut. I now live in Washington, DC. You know I'm a mom. I drink too much coffee, love rescue dogs, and admire people who are truly organized (because I am not one of them). I think about technology policy all the time. Which is probably what you want in the Chairwoman of the FCC.

Now that you know a little about me, let me tell you a little bit about the agency I have the privilege to lead. The Federal Communications Commission is our Nation's expert agency

on communications technology. By some measures, the industries we oversee account for one-sixth of the economy. These are the broadband networks we rely on for everything; the wireless services that are remaking our world; the satellite constellations that keep us connected in the skies; and the broadcasting systems that have long brought us the information we need to make decisions about our lives, our communities, and our country. This is the infrastructure that supports every aspect of civic and commercial life. More than that, it is the foundation for everything we build in the future. And I think if the FCC does its job, we can help make sure everyone, everywhere has a fair shot at success in the digital age.

I think a lot about that phrase, “everyone, everywhere” because it is so important. Not all of us have access to the tools of technology. Not all of us are building the software, services, and networks that power our lives. Not all of us are in the room where it happens or even have a seat at the table.

So when people ask me for advice, I always come back to a quote from Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman to serve in Congress and run for president. She said: “If they don’t give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.” I think those are words to live by.

Now I want to tell you about two times I brought a folding chair to the discussion—and how it made a difference.

First story. Roll back a little over five years. I was a Commissioner at the agency where I serve, not its Chairwoman. I spent a lot of time traveling the country, checking in on the networks and programs the FCC oversees, to get a feel for what they look like on the ground. After all, you only learn so much if you sit in your office in Washington. Getting out is essential.

One program I spent time surveying is called E-Rate. You may never have heard of it. But E-Rate is the Nation’s largest program supporting high-speed internet service in schools and libraries all across the country. It helps fund those connections so kids can get online in classrooms in rural America, urban America, and everything in between.

Wherever I went—big cities and small towns—I heard the same story from the school folks I visited. They told me the E-Rate program was great. It funded networks, delivered services to school, and made possible the use of kinds of new software and teaching tools. But there was one thing. Teacher after teacher told me they were wary of introducing new technologies in the classroom because when they assigned homework not all of their students had internet access when they went home.

They knew because they saw them. They saw students lingering after the final bell rang, sitting in the parking lot with a laptop just to catch the Wi-Fi signal to do their school assignments. They saw children on the steps of the library late at night, doing the same. They saw kids sitting for hours at fast food restaurants, doing their homework with a fizzy drink and a side of fries. And they heard about them researching and pecking out papers on a mobile phone—as long as their data plan didn’t run out.

Now these students—every one of them—had grit. But it shouldn't be this hard. In the United States, we should be able to connect everyone, everywhere—kids included.

So I went back to Washington and did some research. I learned that seven in ten teachers assigned homework that required internet access. But according to data at the FCC, one in three households were not subscribing to broadband. Where these numbers overlapped, I started calling the “homework gap.”

The homework gap didn't exist when I was growing up. All I needed for nightly schoolwork was a paper, a pencil, and my brother leaving me alone. And of course, that last one was the hardest part. But those days are gone.

So I went to my colleagues at the FCC and all over Washington to talk about the homework gap. Millions of students were struggling, stuck in this especially cruel part of the digital divide. But there were no programs for this. There were no conferences, rallies, or legislative initiatives designed to address this problem. There was me, dragging a chair to every discussion I could find. Not everyone listened. Some very assuredly told me that this wasn't a problem, after all they didn't need this when they were in school. In other words, please move your chair back from the table. Nevertheless, I persisted.

Then the pandemic hit. Suddenly I didn't have to work so hard to explain. Because it was right there, out in the open. Our schools shut down and education went online. But across the country students were locked out of the virtual classroom because they didn't have broadband at home. The homework gap was turning into an educational chasm.

And just like that, I no longer had to pull up a folding chair. The discussions went from in-person to online, but the invitations multiplied. Then Congress called and in the American Rescue Plan approved more than \$7 billion to create the Emergency Connectivity Fund—the largest-ever initiative to close the homework gap.

At the FCC, I took those funds and immediately started a program to help students. To date, we have used this homework gap program to reach more than 100,000 schools and help get more than 13 million students the devices and connections they need to succeed. And I'm not going to stop until we reach every student in need—and close the homework gap for good.

Second story. Picture northeast Arkansas. It is a region known as the Upper Delta. This is a place where Johnny Cash spent his childhood and Ernest Hemingway penned *A Farewell to Arms* in a barn. And its fields are known the world over for the rice they produce. But this region is also on the bleeding edge of an ugly trend—increasing maternal mortality. You see the United States is the only industrialized nation with a growing rate of maternal mortality. Black women and Native American women are hit especially hard by this crisis. Meanwhile, pregnant women who live in rural communities are 60 percent more likely to die before, during, or following childbirth than their counterparts in more urban communities.

A while back I had the privilege of spending time learning about the Upper Delta with a team of healthcare professionals from the University of Arkansas. They were coming up with

new ways to use technology to help pregnant women in the region. So they told me about a typical patient. She was diagnosed with preeclampsia, a hypertensive disorder that is a leading cause of maternal mortality. To manage this disorder, monitoring is key. But this patient lived in a rural area. In fact, she had to drive several hours just to give birth in a specialty hospital. There was no way she could make the same drive on a daily basis during the weeks after delivery. So this team at the medical center got creative. They sent her home with a blood pressure cuff, a digital scale to monitor her weight, and a pulse oximeter to measure the levels of oxygen in her blood. She was told to connect all of these devices to a wireless gateway and transmit daily readings to the medical center. This was great—except for one critical detail. This patient had no wireless service at home. As she described it, she lived in a dead zone. So every day after performing these rituals, she climbed in her truck with her newborn, drove to the top of a hill a mile and half away, and sent the data along.

Right after my trip to Arkansas, I was asked to testify before Congress. To do this you do not need to bring a chair. There is one right there for you at the witness table. I sat in it and told this story from the Upper Delta. Because the image of the woman perched on the top of a hill, in a truck with her infant—it stays with you. It also reminds you of how much more work we have to do to ensure that broadband and wireless infrastructure reaches everyone, everywhere.

This was critical because the FCC had been working on a pilot program to explore how communications technology can improve healthcare outcomes. I pulled my chair into that dialogue and made sure maternal healthcare was front and center. When the pandemic hit and new Covid funding was available for telehealth, I did the same. I remember someone asking me: “Why do you care about this so much, why are you being so persistent?” Maybe you’ve been asked this question before, too. I submit there is only one answer. In the words of Lady Gaga: “I was born this way.”

Because I see issues that affect women in technology everywhere.

When we map where broadband is and is not in this country—which the FCC is doing right now—I want us to explore how this data correlates with access to maternal care. Because, as the team at the University of Arkansas taught me, there are solutions, and working together we could create a picture of where maternal mortality rates are especially high and where telemedicine resources need to be deployed.

When we update our Lifeline program to help low-income households get basic phone service, I want us to find a way for those experiencing domestic violence to be able to set up a secure and private account so they can call for help without fear of being monitored.

When court decisions roll back rights that threaten the bodily autonomy of women, I want to know we can seek out healthcare—or anything else—without being surveilled by our phones and having providers sell that data to the highest bidder. After all, the devices we all carry in our palms, pockets, and purses know a lot about us. They know our whereabouts at any moment. This geolocation data is especially sensitive. It is a record of where we have been and who we are. That is why, this summer, I wrote to the Nation’s top 15 mobile providers seeking information about their geolocation data retention and privacy practices. Then we did something

new. We made their responses public. I am following this up with an investigation to ensure providers comply with our policies requiring them to disclose to consumers just how they are using and sharing geolocation data. I am also making it easier for consumers to file complaints with us about how providers are handling this sensitive data—so we can take action under the law.

I want to close with one more story. This one is not about bringing a chair to the table. Instead, it is about the signs we see along the way.

Some months back, I moved into my new office in Washington. You know those grand buildings with stone facades and stately columns out front? The ones that remind you with their very architecture that you are in the Nation’s capital? The FCC headquarters is not one of those buildings. Instead, it is a nondescript place that is all angles, glass, and steel. The agency relocated to it during the pandemic. When I first walked into the building, the floors were gleaming, the lights were bright, and everything felt brand new—because it was. The signs were new, too. They told you what floor you were on and pointed you to the offices that make up the FCC. The signs directing me to my office said “Chairman.” After 87 years, it never occurred to anyone that a woman would run the agency.

I moved in; they changed the signs. But these signals we all get in our personal and professional lives matter. They shape who we think we can be and where we believe we can ascend. That is why it is so important that when you do break glass ceilings or get a seat at the table, look to see who is left behind. Find a way to be a sponsor, be a mentor, and be someone who brings someone else along. In other words, pull up a chair for others.

Thank you Grace Hopper and Anita B for giving me this remarkable opportunity. And thank you for being such a great audience and inspiring me to believe that when we work together we can build a brighter digital future for everyone, everywhere.