

Each March, we remember and celebrate the enormous contributions made throughout America's history by the women of this nation. I was pleased to join my colleagues in Congress in 1987 to proclaim the first annual "Women's History Month." In the 23 years since, American women of all races, classes, and ethnic backgrounds have continued to build on this legacy of achievement, pushing past obstacles to a future of even greater equality, opportunity, and success.

Now more than ever before, women are building upon the progress of the past and playing a critical role in all facets of our nation's prosperity – socially, politically, economically, and culturally. As today's women have been inspired by such towering figures as Susan B. Anthony and Mary McLeod Bethune, they in turn will instill a sense of hope and possibility in future generations of great American women.

Today, women are employed as professionals in fields that 30 years ago were not even an option and hold positions of authority and responsibility at almost every level of government. Women today own 10.4 million businesses, big and small, collectively employing more than 12.8 million workers, and generating **\$1.9 trillion in sales**. For the past two decades, majority women-owned firms have continued to

**grow at around two times the rate**

of all firms. And in 2009, more than 70 million women were employed in the U.S. These figures underscore how much female business owners and workers are a major driver of America's economic growth.

Young women and girls are also participating and succeeding in their schools and communities. According to the last census, women now earn slightly more high school diplomas than men do. And women complete bachelor's degrees and advanced degrees at higher rates than ever before, rates nearly equal to those of men. Our school-age young women are also achieving extracurricular excellence. Thanks to the landmark Title IX legislation of 1972, girls are now guaranteed an equal opportunity to participate in athletic activities. In 2009, 3 million high school girls participated in their school athletic programs – triple the number of girls who were participating in sports the year Title IX was enacted.

But the victories of the past and present must not blind us to the challenges of the future. American women still face too many unjust barriers and unnecessary inequalities; and this isn't just a problem for women, this is a problem that permeates our entire society. Throughout my career in public office, I have worked hard not only to understand the problem, but to be a part of the solution. That is why as one of its first acts, the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress passed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act to strengthen laws prohibiting wage discrimination on the basis of gender, among other individual characteristics.

So as we take time to appreciate and celebrate all that women have done to enrich our own lives and the life of our country, we should strive to learn more about the rich history of women in America and to educate ourselves about the challenges that lie ahead.