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In Vietnam, Obama delivers subtle message on the role of women

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President Obama stopped in front of a gold Buddha statue inside the ornate Jade Emperor Pagoda, where a guide explained that Vietnamese often portray the symbol of enlightenment as a female.

Still, he added, many Asian families prefer to give birth to a son.

"I like daughters," Obama replied.

For the 54-year-old father of two teenage girls, the line was delivered with good humor and drew a chuckle from aides nearby. But it also served as a subtle message from a U.S. president who has tried to promote a set of democratic values to developing nations that includes equality for women.

As he has on past trips to Southeast Asia and to Africa, Obama spent time during his three days in Vietnam this week talking about the need to provide full educational and job opportunities to women and girls.

"We think gender equality is an important principle," Obama said during a speech to 2,300 at the Hanoi Convention Center a day before his tour of the pagoda. "Strong, confident women have always moved Vietnam forward. The evidence is clear - I say this wherever I go around the world - families, communities and countries are more prosperous when girls and women have an equal opportunity to succeed."

In the United States, Obama often makes a point of telling audiences that the first bill he signed as president was the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act that extends the statute of limitations for filing an equal pay lawsuit.

He has spoken out against sexual violence against women on college campuses. His administration has announced plans to feature abolitionist Harriet Tubman on the \$20 bill.

In Vietnam, the effort was not overt; the president did not have any events aimed solely at highlighting the role of women in society. Instead, the message was weaved quietly into the symbolism at virtually each stop along the way. Two of the three people on the stage with Obama during an event on entrepreneurship were women; and two of the half-dozen civil society leaders who met with Obama were women, and they were seated on either side of the president during the discussion.

At a town hall-style event with young people in Ho Chi Minh City, Obama told the crowd he would field questions in alternating "girl, boy" fashion to ensure fairness.

When two women activists asked him about efforts to deal with human trafficking, the president responded that one of the most important ways to prevent it is to "focus on women and girls because a lot of human trafficking results because of the fact that girls are not given the same educational opportunities as boys, and as a consequence find themselves in very desperate situations."

Obama has talked often about being raised by a single mother, and he told the crowd of 800 at the town hall event that he was sometimes unserious and rebellious while growing up because of a lack of a father figure. "I rebelled in part because something was missing," he said.

Yet Obama has also noted that he is surrounded by strong, intelligent women in first lady Michelle Obama, daughters Malia and Sasha and his mother-in-law, Marian Robinson. The president has often joked about the first lady being more popular than he is, but he has recently been confronted by the realization that his daughters also are becoming more sought after by the public.

During a discussion at the entrepreneurs' event, a woman asked the president how he would respond if Malia, who plans to attend Harvard University in 2017 after taking a gap year, told him she wanted to spend her year off school in Vietnam.

"Oh, I would encourage it," Obama said, but he quickly mitigated his answer. Malia, he noted, will turn 18 next month and has developed her own opinions. "So if you want her to come to Vietnam," the president added, "I shouldn't be the one to tell her. Maybe you should tell her."

The crowd chuckled.

The following day, at the town-hall event, the president was nearing the end of his hour-long program when he called on a woman who was adamantly motioning to him.

"I'm a rapper here," she told him, before asking about the role of government in promoting arts and culture.

"Before I answer your question," Obama replied, "why don't you give me a little rap. Let's see."

Then the president of the United States made a brief beat boxing sound into his microphone and the woman - later identified as 26-year-old Hang Lam Trang Anh, a performer known here by her stage name Suboi and considered by some to be the nation's "queen of hip hop" - laid down a few bars of freestyle in Vietnamese.