

## Michelle Obama's Speech

Konichiwa. I am so pleased to be here today as the United States and Japan announce a new partnership to educate girls across the globe.

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Right now, as you heard, 62 million girls worldwide are not in school. And when we talk about this issue, we often focus on the economic barriers girls face -- school fees or uniforms, or how they live miles from the nearest school and have no safe transportation, or how the school in their community doesn't have bathroom facilities for girls so they just can't attend.

But we all know that the problem here isn't just about infrastructure and resources. It's also about attitudes and beliefs. It's about whether fathers -- and mothers -- think their daughters are as worthy of an education as their sons. It's about whether communities value girls simply for their bodies, for their household labor, their reproductive capacities, or whether they value girls for their minds as well. It's about whether societies cling to laws and traditions that oppress women, or whether they view women as full citizens entitled to the same rights and freedoms as men.

And if we're being honest with ourselves, we have to admit that these kinds of challenges aren't just limited to the developing world. For example, while we have made tremendous strides in girls' education in the United States and Japan, women in both our countries still struggle to balance the needs of their families with the demands of their careers. We still struggle with the outdated belief that a woman cannot be both an accomplished professional and a devoted mother; that she has to choose between the two.

But the reality is that when we put limits like this on women's lives, we stifle their potential, and, more importantly, we miss out on so much of what they have to offer our societies. And for me, that's where this issue gets personal.

See, I grew up in a working-class neighborhood, a place where hardly anyone went to university. Many people worked long hours for low salaries, struggled to pay their bills. As a young girl I was bright, outgoing, with plenty of thoughts and opinions of my own, but like

a lot of young women, I was often primarily defined by my relationship to the men in my life. I was my father's daughter, or, even though I was just as smart as my brother -- I could hit a ball just as far, I could run just as fast -- I was always just his little sister.

When I got to school, I sometimes encountered teachers who assumed that a girl from a humble background like mine wouldn't be a successful student. I was even told that I would never get accepted to the prestigious school like Princeton University, so I shouldn't even apply. Like so many girls across the globe, I got the message that someone like me wasn't supposed to have big dreams; that I should keep my head down, my voice quiet, and I should make myself just a little smaller to fit other people's modest expectations.

But I was lucky. I had parents who believed in me, who urged me to speak up and make myself heard in the world. So I held fast to my dreams. I worked hard in school. I went ahead and I applied to Princeton -- and I got accepted. I went on to become a lawyer, a city government employee, a hospital executive, and the director of an organization that trained young people to serve their communities.

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Just think about what we would be missing here in Japan if women were not educated. Just imagine if Sadako Ogata was never able to attend school and become one of the greatest diplomats of our time. Imagine the loss of her moral leadership at the United Nations.

So just take my story, or any of these women's stories, and multiply it by 62 million. That's when we begin to understand the loss to our world when we fail to educate our girls.

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Thank you so much.