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Michelle Obama

Address at 'Let Girls Learn' Joint Partnership with Japan Announcement

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

And before I get started, on behalf of myself and my husband, I want to join in with the others to express our condolences over the horrific event yesterday in Tunisia. Our hearts go out to the loved ones of those who were lost here in Japan and around the world. They are very much in our thoughts and prayers today.

I now want to start by thanking my dear friend Mrs. [Akie] Abe for her tremendous kindness and hospitality. I am happy to be here with you today. And I want to thank her for her passionate work on behalf of girls worldwide. Mrs. Abe has been deeply involved in Japan's efforts to create this partnership, and I am so grateful to her and to Prime Minister Abe for their leadership.

I also want to thank Director General Naoko Saiki for her wonderful remarks as well, and for her leadership.



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And of course, I want to recognize our outstanding Ambassador, Caroline Kennedy, who is a dear friend. I am thrilled that she could join us today because I know that she shares our commitment to addressing our girls' education crisis. And I don't use the word lightly -- this truly is a crisis. 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.



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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. And most of all, I became a mother, which is by far the most important job I will ever have in my life.

Now, continuing my career while raising my daughters wasn't easy, but for me, this was the right decision. For me, being a mother made me a better professional, because coming home every night to my girls reminded me what I was working for. And being a professional made me a better mother, because by pursuing my dreams, I was modeling for my girls how to pursue their dreams. And there were two main reasons I was able to achieve this balance.

First, I had the support from my husband and family who believed in me, and from my employers, who recognized the value of hiring women and providing flexible workplaces. And both Prime Minister Abe and President Obama are working very hard to create policies like this that allow women -- and men -- to be excellent employees and excellent spouses and parents.

And second, like so many other women, I was able to achieve both personal and professional goals because of my education. My education was truly the starting point for every opportunity I have had in my life.

But I know that for every girl like me, there are so many others across the globe who are just as smart, just as capable, just as hungry to succeed, but they never have the chance to go to school. And that is such a profound waste of human potential -- and such a profound loss for our world.

I mean, 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.

And what if the great violinist, Midori, never had the chance to discover her talent. Think about all the music we would never have heard. Think of all the beauty our world would have lost.

And how about Chiaki Mukai. Without her education, she never could have become the first woman astronaut in Japan, inspiring so many young girls to reach for the stars.

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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But when we do educate girls, when we truly invest in their potential, there is no limit to the impact we can have. Girls who attend school have healthier families. They earn higher salaries. And sending more girls to school can boost a country's entire economy. So we know that educating girls is the best investment we can make, not just in their future, but in the future of their families, their communities and their countries.

And that is why the United States government recently launched a new, global girls' education effort called Let Girls Learn. As part of this initiative, U.S. Peace Corps volunteers will work side-by-side with local leaders, families, and girls themselves to help girls go to school and stay in school. They'll be creating mentoring programs, girls' leadership camps and so much more.

But, as Mrs. Abe said, of course, no one country can solve this problem alone. And that is why I am here today in Japan. Japan is one of America's closest and most important allies and development partners. In fact, Japan is the largest aid donor in all of Asia. And today, Japan is once again leading the way with a 42-billion-yen investment in girls' education.

With this commitment, Japan is truly setting the standard for countries around the world. And with this new partnership between our two nations, we are issuing a call to action to nations around the world.

In the coming months and years, we will be reaching out to world leaders and asking them to deepen their commitment to girls' education. For those who are already investing, we're going to ask them to invest more. For those not yet engaged, we will invite them to join us. And I think it is fitting that we are starting this global effort here with our friends in Japan. Because when it comes to development issues like girls' education, our two countries share a unique history, as you've heard.

President John F. Kennedy launched the Peace Corps back in 1961, and that inspired youth groups here in Japan who helped found JPOV [Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers], which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. And today, President Kennedy's daughter is proudly serving as America's ambassador to Japan, and we are renewing our agreement for Peace Corps and JOCV volunteers to work together on issues like girls' education.

As Mrs. Abe said, later this week, I'll be traveling to Cambodia, which is one of the first countries where Let Girls Learn will operate. And I understand that Mrs. Abe just made her own visit to Cambodia, where she focused on youth and education issues. And we are both so excited to highlight the work that Peace Corps and JOCV volunteers are doing in that country and so many others; how they're coming together to model the values of our nation -- values like fairness, equality, openness, opportunity.



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And today, I'm reminded of something that President Kennedy once said about young people who want to join the Peace Corps. He said that they are "a light to all who seek a peaceful world." And I think that is just as true today as it was 50 years ago, especially when it comes to educating girls. So many women leaders in developing countries -- businesswomen, politicians, professionals -- they can trace their journey back to a Peace Corps or JOCV volunteer who invested in their education.

The story of a woman named Anastasia Msosa from Malawi is a perfect example. When Anastasia was a girl, Peace Corps volunteers came to teach at her school in Malawi, and Anastasia was struck by their kindness and generosity. Inspired by their encouragement, Anastasia went on to build a pioneering legal career, and she eventually became the first female chief justice of Malawi's Supreme Court.

In reflecting on the impact the volunteers had on her life, Chief Justice Msosa said -- and this is her quote -- she said, "The volunteers shaped me into building up to be what I am." She said, "The time with the Peace Corps volunteers helped me to have dreams."

So when Prime Minister Abe and Mrs. Abe talk about building a "society where women shine," I think this is what they're talking about. They're talking about letting the power, the genius, the creativity of women shine through. They're talking about ensuring that women and girls can pursue their dreams.

And that's what this effort is all about. It's about creating a world where women shine. A world where every family, every community and every nation can benefit from the contributions of all of its citizens, men and women, boys and girls. And I cannot think of a better partner -- better partners in this work than Mrs. Abe and Prime Minister Abe, and the great country they serve.

I am so grateful to them. I am grateful to all of you. And I am so grateful to the Peace Corps and JOCV volunteers who are making this vision a reality every day across the globe.

I look forward to working with all of you in the years ahead to give girls worldwide the education they so richly deserve.

Arigato gozaimasu. Thank you. Thank you so much.