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Toward a gender-inclusive society:
Closing the gender gap through education

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The gender gap and discrimination have been problems for a long time and the gap still remains wide even in modern times. What are the reasons for the gender gap and what needs to be done to eliminate it?

I became interested in the issue of the gender gap because I had experienced discrimination and inequality myself. As a child, I lived in China for seven years. At that time, I was discriminated against just because I was Japanese or a girl. I had a Chinese neighborhood friend then who was about my age and we played together almost every day. One day, when we were playing as usual, her grandmother came to pull her away from me. She said, "She's Japanese so you can't talk or play with her." Then she brought her back home. I could not understand why I was not able to be with her back then. Looking back, I now know the grandmother's early childhood education probably instilled in her prejudice against Japanese people. It led me into thinking that early childhood education can develop discrimination, prejudice and the gender gap. Thus, I became interested in the importance of education.

Now, let's look at the current state of the gender gap by using the issue of girl's education as an example. First of all, it is estimated that 132 million girls are out of school around the world, including 52 million in Sub-Saharan Africa and 46.5 million in South Asia. If girls cannot go to school, they will be left behind in the society because of the lack of proper education. Their mistaken knowledge can be passed down to their own children. That is how discrimination and prejudice have taken root among people through such a vicious circle. Malala Yousafzai, a 2014 Nobel Peace Prize winner, appeals to the world to ensure that children who cannot be educated, especially girls, get an education based on her own experience. Unfortunately, this issue remains unsolved, and due to issues such as poverty, child marriage, school, society and family environment.

How about the situation in Japan? After World War II, the issue of gender equality has been raised with the establishment of women's suffrage, the Basic Act for Gender-Equal Society, the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, etc. However, while more than 30 years have passed since the Equal Employment Opportunity Act went into effect, the gender gap has not been completely eliminated even today. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2019, Japan ranked 121st out of 157 countries, with the score of

0.652. This figure was the lowest among the G7 countries. The index is calculated based on 14 subcategories across four key areas: economy, education, health and politics, and solely focuses on the gender gap without any reference to the country's culture or economic level. While Japan scored relatively high in the education and health categories, the gap was large in the economy and politics categories. In terms of political empowerment, Japan ranked particularly poorly at No. 135 in the "Women in parliament" category and at No. 139 in the "Women in ministerial positions" category; one of the lowest in the world respectively. I also often hear about women having difficulty in returning to work after maternity or child care leave. However, discrimination not only against women but men is now seen as a problem. Women in particular have a stereotype that "men should be strong". Some argue when men show interest in non-traditional jobs, they are more likely than women to come under social pressure. This is proof that the gender gap and discrimination still remain here in Japan.

As described earlier, I believe that such discrimination, prejudice and the gender gap occur because of early childhood education. Reasons behind the slow progress of girl's education in Africa and South Asia are due to traditional customs and people's awareness about gender such as "girls don't need education" and "women only have roles as a wife and mother". If they are brought up in such an environment and taught such concepts to be natural from an early age, some girls can grow up to have the same mindset that their children do not need education as well. Here in Japan too, compulsory subjects were divided for boys and girls only 30 years ago: technical arts for boys and home economics for girls. Some data show that the ratio in sharing cleaning, washing and cooking duties in the generation which learned home economics as a co-education subject is about 15 percent higher on average for each chore compared to other generations. This shows that awareness has been changing regarding housework which women were largely responsible up until now. This is a clear example of how childhood education can influence people's practices and awareness when they grow up.

What type of education should educational institutions and everyone provide to children to solve this issue? I believe it is important for adults to realize discrimination and prejudice exist among them first and avoid creating an atmosphere where children are not comfortable to speak their minds. That is because it is not easy for children at a sensitive age to challenge general gender concepts which are instilled in adult society. School is a place where children experience the gender gap and inequality, that is why it is also a place where children themselves can question inequality. I think the adults around children should not force their ideas on them, but they should support children to acquire abilities to identify what constitutes discrimination and try to resist it. In French-speaking Switzerland, new teaching material for children was created to raise awareness of gender equality under the project called "The School of Equality". Because the teaching material is used in ordinary classes and not in special classes, it can enlighten children more effectively on gender equality. In my view, if such childhood education is also established in Japan, the concept of gender equality will take root, even just by a little.

I do not think the gender gap and discrimination can be completely eliminated. No matter how hard we try to change people's awareness and the education, everyone has their own individuality. Even so, when everyone recognizes the difference in individuality and respects it, we can create a gender-inclusive society. "One child, one teacher, one pen and one book can change the world. Education is the only solution. Education first". Malala Yousafzai continues to advocate for gender equality today. We must reconsider how education should be for our future self and for our children.