

Michelle Obama: If you're afraid to use your voice, give up your seat at the table

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Speaking up in the workplace can be intimidating, but it's a practice that former First Lady Michelle Obama says everyone needs to adopt.

In a conversation Tuesday at the Pennsylvania Conference for Women, Obama spoke with television producer and bestselling author Shonda Rhimes about the need for women to voice their opinion in order to activate the change they want to see.

"Don't waste your seat at the table," Philadelphia Business Journal reports her saying. "If you are scared to use your voice, then you've got to get up and give it to someone who isn't afraid to use the spot."

Obama recalled the time when speaking up earned her a flexible work schedule at the University of Chicago Medical Center. During this time, former President Barack Obama was working as an Illinois Senator and the couple's two daughters were young.

"That was one of the first times I demanded flexibility," says Obama.

She told her boss that she shouldn't be held to the same strict work schedule as her colleagues who didn't have kids, adding, "That was part of me using my voice."

Tuesday's conference was not the first time Obama has spoken about her personal experience with negotiating flex-time in the workplace.

In 2014 at the White House Working Families Summit, Obama shared how she actually brought her newborn daughter Sasha with her to her interview at the University of Chicago Medical Center.

"Who I was at the time was a breastfeeding mother of a four-month-old and I didn't have a babysitter, so I promptly took Sasha to the interview with me," she said at the summit.

"I thought, look, this is who I am. I've got a husband who's away. I've got two little babies. They are my priority," she added. "If you want me to do the job, you've got to pay me to do the job and you've got to give me flexibility."

Obama isn't the only leader who advocates for more workplace flexibility. Earlier this year, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg discussed the importance of paid family leave and company flexibility when announcing the social platform's new employee policy on bereavement leave.

"There have been many times when I've been grateful to work at companies that supported families," wrote Sandberg in a Facebook post. "When my son was born and I could take time off to focus on him. When my daughter came along and I got that time all over again."

Speaking to her personal experience with flexible work arrangements, Sandberg wrote that "making it easier for more Americans to be the workers and family members they want to be will make our economy and country stronger."