



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
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Organisation
des Nations Unies
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Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Address by Irina Bokova,

Director-General of UNESCO

on the occasion of the Luncheon International Women's Day

Washington, 14 March 2012

Excellency Lakshmi Puri, Assistant Secretary-General for UN Women,

Mr Peter Yeo, Vice President of the United Nations Foundation,

Mr Rodney Bent, Director of the United Nations Information Centre,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you, Peter for your kind introduction.

It is a pleasure to attend this *International Women's Day Luncheon*.

I thank the *United Nations Foundation*, the *United Nations Information Centre* and the *Women's Foreign Policy Group* for inviting me to be with you today.

International Women's Day was first honoured one hundred and one years ago in a handful of European countries.

I see several lessons to take from the experience of the last century.

The first is that gender equality lies at the heart of the struggle for fundamental freedoms and justice.

Gender equality is a human rights issue.

Second, equality is a force for transformation.

The last century has shown it to be critical to the full realization of any country's development strategy.

Leave out women and girls and you exclude 50 percent of your brain power, 50 percent of your creative genius, 50 percent of your economic drivers.

Study after study shows the positive impact of gender equality in education on child and maternal health, on poverty reduction, on economic growth.

The empowerment of women is good common sense.

It is also a security issue.

Girls and women suffer disproportionately from armed conflict.

They are also often the best advocates for reconciliation after tensions have subsided.

The last century has also taught us that gender equality is everyone's job.

Governments are key -- but so are civil society and business, teachers and the media.

Individuals matter especially.

It is important to recognize the role of pioneers, whose courage has changed history.

The award of the 2011 *Nobel Peace Prize* to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of Liberia, Leymah Gbowee also from Liberia, and Tawakkol Karman from Yemen shined the spotlight on three such pioneers.

My key point is that empowering girls and women is a game-changer for human development.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton made this argument powerfully at the *Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation High-Level Policy Dialogue* last September.

All studies of progress towards the Millennium Development Goals underline its importance for growth.

For this, we must target catalytic points, with powerful multiplier effects.

Education is one of these multipliers.

A child born to a mother who can read is 50 percent more likely to survive past the age of five years old.

Education gives a voice, it encourages political participation, and it increases opportunities on the labour market.

There can be no equitable or just society without gender equality -- *and this begins with education.*

The fact is we are not there yet.

Tracking progress is vital -- to know where there is movement, where obstacles remain.

This is an important part of what UNESCO does – through our annual *Education for All Global Monitoring Reports* and the work of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, which just launched the first *World Atlas of Gender Equality in Education*.

The picture is clear, *and worrying.*

The world is not on track to meet the 2015 goals we set for the Education for All campaign that UNESCO is leading.

Globally, girls are more likely to never enter primary school than boys.

Less than 40 percent of countries provide girls and boys with equal access to education.

In sub-Saharan Africa, we estimate that almost 12 million girls may never enrol in school.

Discrimination is compounded by poverty.

In Yemen, for instance, 90 percent of women aged between 17 and 22 years old have less than 4 years of education.

Women still represent two-thirds of the world's adult illiterate population of 796 million.

The price we pay for this is unacceptable.

Inequality condemns individuals to poverty, it undermines the health of societies, and it curtails opportunities for sustainable growth.

Equality is not a numbers game.

It means benefiting from equal treatment within schools. It means the same opportunities of employment and civic participation.

These goals guide UNESCO in all its activities.

We are working where needs are most acute.

In Iraq, we are supporting teacher training and the rehabilitation of higher education.

We have set up Community Learning Centres outside Baghdad to provide literacy to girls and women.

In Afghanistan, we are reaching out to 600,000 learners across 18 provinces -- with women and girls as a priority.

In Pakistan, we are helping secondary and non-formal education to recover in flood-afflicted areas, and we are targeting girls and women with literacy skills through 65 Community Learning Centres.

In Kinshasa, UNESCO has established a *Regional Research and Documentation Centre for Women, Gender and Peace-building in the Great Lakes Region* -- to help prevent sexual and gender-based violence in the region and to promote women's role in peacebuilding and reconstruction.

We are preparing to support the Government of Myanmar in reviewing its education sector policy.

88 percent of women in South Sudan are illiterate. UNESCO is helping this new State establish its first education strategy.

I am grateful for the video we just saw on Malawi.

UNESCO is leading the education component of the *Joint UN Programme on Adolescent Girls in Malawi* (2010-2011) that seeks to advance the rights of adolescent girls in rural areas.

We are working here to improve the attendance of adolescent girls and to widen their access to sexual and reproductive health information and services.

Science education is an important part of this work -- thanks to the support of the *United Nations Foundation*.

In Guatemala also, we are working on rural indigenous adolescent girls, with UN Women and other partners -- to increase their access to formal and informal education.

The United Nations cannot tackle these challenges alone.

We need new forms of soft power, that draw together the creativity of civil society and the private sector with public organisations.

Last May, UNESCO launched in Paris a *Global Partnership for Girls' and Women's Education*, with United States Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton and United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

The Global Partnership targets the weak links of girls' secondary education and women's literacy.

We have joined forces with major private sector companies to make a concrete impact on the ground.

Our partnership with Sunny Varkey's GEMS Education provides gender-sensitive training to teachers and principals in Kenya and Lesotho.

It includes the "10,000 Principals" project to train school principals in Ghana, Kenya and India -- as part of the *Clinton Global Initiative*.

With Procter and Gamble, we are focusing on girls' and women's literacy -- working through community centres in Senegal to reach 40,000 young women.

With the Packard Foundation, we are targeting girls' drop-out rates in secondary schools in Ethiopia and Tanzania.

With India's Barefoot College, we are training illiterate rural women -- starting in Africa -- to become local entrepreneurs in solar technology.

With Nokia, we are strengthening learning through the use of mobile technologies.

With the United States, we are seeking to harness the power of mobile phone learning to improve literacy skills for girls and women.

Each of these initiatives multiplies the power of gender equality.

Leadership is another multiplier.

We must inspire girls and women to lead.

Take the example of science, where women represent only 29 percent of researchers globally.

For over ten years, UNESCO has partnered with L'Oréal to promote women in scientific research and to support new careers for young women researchers.

Since 1998, we have recognized over 700 women scientists from more than 70 countries.

The winners of the 2008 *UNESCO-L'Oreal Women in Science Award* went on to receive the Nobel Prize one year later -- the Israeli scientist Ada Yonath for chemistry and the American scientist Elizabeth Blackburn for medicine.

On 29 March, we will hold the 14th ceremony of the Awards at UNESCO Headquarters. Professor Bonnie Bassler, from Princeton University, will receive the Award for her outstanding work on bacterial communication.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

One year ago, we saw women marching on Bourguiba Avenue in Tunis.

We have seen women, young and old, come out into the streets across the region to press for human rights and justice.

The Arab Spring has shaken a part of the world that most observers thought was impervious to change -- and probably would have been were it not for the active participation of women.

Young girls and women are changing the world.

We must support them. We must invest more in education.

In times of uncertainty, this is the smartest way out of a crisis.

We are making progress, but we still have far to go.

We have yet to deliver women's empowerment in the Arab Spring, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in sub-Saharan Africa.

UNESCO is working with the United States on the front lines of women's empowerment across the world.

I know you are all aware of the difficulties we are currently facing as a result of the vote by Member States to admit Palestine as a member.

Notwithstanding this political decision taken by UNESCO's General Conference, more than ever before, we need United States leadership and engagement. UNESCO matters to Americans, because we are the platform from which our shared values on gender equality and the empowerment of women are taken forward on the global agenda.

Our work together cannot slow down – the world will not wait, and we have an important role to play.

Thank you.