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Message from Ms Irina Bokova,

Director-General of UNESCO

on the occasion of the International Day of the Girl Child

Empowering Adolescent Girls: Ending the Cycle of Violence

11 October 2014

This year, for the third celebration of the International Day of the Girl Child, we focus on the full development of girls and the continued fight against violence to them.

Teenage years are particularly delicate moments for girls, from childhood to adulthood. In too many parts of the world, this is the age when girls drop out of school, and are victims of violence -- physical or verbal, direct or insidious. In some countries, almost one in five teenage girls has been sexually abused. The practice of female genital mutilation or female circumcision remains rooted in many traditions. All of this results in trauma, leading to unwanted pregnancy and contributing to the spread of HIV/AIDS, ruining lives with an impact across society.

Violence against girls should be banned, especially at school, which must be a safe a place for discovery and self-development. It is intolerable that the girls are harassed, physically or psychologically. By supporting the school as a place of equality, respect and non-violence, we can transform the lives of millions of girls, and strengthen society as a whole.

This is the goal of all of UNESCO's work and an important part of our efforts to craft more sustainable societies and paths to development. Our best weapon against violence is to fight against the ignorance and prejudice on which it feeds -- through education. *"My pen is my sword"* is inscribed on the wall of the Ayesha Durrani School for girls in Kabul. This is also UNESCO's message today. The more women

achieve a high level of education, the less they suffer from early marriages and unwanted pregnancies. If all the girls in sub-Saharan Africa and West and South Asia had a secondary education, early marriage would fall by 64 percent and births by 59 percent. We can reduce violence through knowledge, thanks to research centre and documentation networks on gender equality, on the basis of textbooks on puberty, and through awareness-raising programmes for girls and boys.

These are the objectives guiding the *Global Partnership for Girls and Women's Education* as well as the programmes financed by the *Malala Fund for Girls' Right to Education*, launched by UNESCO. This is also the spirit of our cooperation with UN-Women, to develop global guidelines for Ministers of Education in the fight against the violation of the human rights of girls.

Violence against girls and women is never acceptable, never tolerable, never pardonable. Today, I call upon all Member States, and all our partners in the private sector and civil society, to join forces with UNESCO to strengthen girls' education and to end the cycle of violence that weakens us all.

Irina Bokova