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联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

**Message from Ms Irina Bokova,**

**Director-General of UNESCO**

**on the occasion of the International Women's Day**

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Too often marginalised, women living in rural settings face steep challenges to the exercise of their human rights, their personal development and the pursuit of their aspirations. Across the world, this is weakening societies and holding back their development. Tackling this problem is the goal of the 2012 *International Women's Day*.

In studies of progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, rural women fare consistently worse than rural men, as well as urban women and men, on every indicator for which there is data. Education provides stark illustration. Girls from rural areas are far less likely to go to school than either rural boys or urban boys and girls. Women make up two thirds of the world's 796 million illiterate people, many of whom live in rural areas.

The fate of rural women is a serious challenge and a core development issue. The stakes are high, and they are often overlooked. At the local level, women play a key role in supporting their households and communities to achieve food security, to generate income, and to improve their livelihoods. Rural women are key actors in agriculture and rural enterprises, helping to fuel both local and global economies. They are also custodians of the indigenous and traditional knowledge that is vital for developing more sustainably and responding to climate change.

UNESCO acts to support the empowerment of girls and women across the world. Our new *Global Partnership for Girls' and Women's Education* seeks to improve access to secondary education and to bolster literacy -- with a focus on girls and women in rural areas.

We work with partners in civil society and the private sector to take this forward. With the Barefoot College, for instance, we are training illiterate rural women – starting in Africa -- to become local entrepreneurs in solar technology. We are promoting community radio in order to provide rural women with access to knowledge and support. We are bolstering the role played by women as holders of local and indigenous knowledge and as both agents of change and social cohesion.

The rights of rural women must be protected, and their aspirations must be supported. *International Women's Day* is a chance for all to take a stand against this form of discrimination and marginalisation that weakens all of our societies.

Irina Bokova