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International
Women's Day 2015



RE-THINKING
WOMEN'S
EMPOWERMENT AND
GENDER EQUALITY
IN 2015
AND BEYOND

UNESCO follow-up paper
on International Women's Day
March 2015



International Women's Day, 2015
Follow-up Paper
International Conference
"Re-Thinking Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality in 2015 and beyond"
4 March 2015, Room X, 2-5pm
UNESCO Headquarters

Introductory Speech:

Ms Irina Bokova, Director-General, UNESCO

Moderator:

Ms S. Gülser Corat, Director, Division for Gender Equality, UNESCO

Panelists:

Ms Tsetska Tsacheva, President of the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria

H.E. Dr Masoumeh Ebtekar, Vice-President of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Head of the Environmental Protection Organisation

H.E. Ms Laura Chinchilla, former President of Costa Rica

Ms Gertrude Mongella, President and Executive Director of Advocacy for Women in Africa and Secretary General of the 1995 Beijing Conference

Ms Nicole Ameline, President of the CEDAW Committee

Ms Hynd Ayoubi Idrissi, Professor of law, member of the Committee on the Rights of the Child

Introduction

Beijing Platform for Action

- *“The advancement of women and the achievement of equality between women and men are a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and should not be seen in isolation as a women's issue. They are the only way to build a sustainable, just and developed society. Empowerment of women and equality between women and men are prerequisites for achieving political, social, economic, cultural and environmental security among all peoples.”*

This year celebrates the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted in 1995 during the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. In 1995, 189 countries committed themselves to empowering women and achieving gender equality. However, twenty years later there are still major inequalities remaining between women and men across the globe.


As a specialized UN agency, UNESCO plays a key role in fostering change and shaping a better future. Since 2008, UNESCO has made gender equality a global priority and contributes to a gender mainstreaming approach in Education, the Sciences, Culture and Communication and Information.

UNESCO invited six eminent women to a Conference on “Re-thinking Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equality in 2015 and beyond” to discuss the progress made since the Beijing Conference and the challenges which remain. The review takes place at a strategic time as it coincides with the deadline for the Millennium Development Goals and the shaping of a new global sustainable development agenda. Therefore, it is essential for gender equality to be positioned at the heart of the post-2015 agenda both as a priority in itself and as a means to the full realisation of the development goals.

During her Opening Remarks, UNESCO's Director-General, **Irina Bokova**, reminded the audience of the essential role of women in shaping a better future and the fundamental human right that is gender equality.

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF UNESCO, IRINA BOKOVA:

- *“In moving forward, we must ensure that women’s empowerment and gender equality stand at the heart of all of our work to craft a better future.”*
- *“As Director-General, I am determined to prioritise the rights of girls and women on the global agenda in all areas of UNESCO’s competence as well as in our action on the ground.”*
- *“Not only is gender equality a fundamental human right, it is also a necessary condition for the achievement of all development goals. Without the full contribution of women, no society can fulfill its potential. At UNESCO we recognise this vital role that gender equality plays which is why we have made gender equality one of our two global priorities.”*



This Conference was a valuable occasion to assess progress and highlight obstacles to the achievement of gender equality, and to identify key challenges and next steps to be taken toward gender equality. Innovative ideas were presented regarding UNESCO's contribution to and implementation of the post-2015 development agenda on gender equality. Alliances with new partners were envisaged, to contribute to the acceleration of efforts towards achieving gender equality. For example, **Nicole Ameline** suggested that UNESCO supports the CEDAW Committee's project of creating a mobile application on equality in education.

Furthermore, new mechanisms and modalities to support UNESCO's Member States in promoting gender equality were discussed.


While participants at the Conference evoked all of the twelve critical areas of concern listed in the Beijing Platform for Action, some were further developed, notably because of the participants' experiences and knowledge in these areas. The main topics discussed concerned women's and girls' education, discrimination and violence against women, women's participation in decision-making and politics, the environment and the media. Throughout, participants emphasized the challenge of reconciling the universality of rights and the diversity of women's realities. For instance, **Hynd Ayoubi Idrissi** highlighted that to guarantee the universality of rights, the diversity of culture and civilisation must be taken into account.

General Comments on the Post-2015 Vision for Gender Equality:

Gertrude Mongella, President and Executive Director of Advocacy for Women in Africa, and Secretary General of the 1995 Beijing Conference, talked about the impact of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action on the promotion of gender equality worldwide as well as the major remaining challenges. According to her, Beijing was a revolution. It was characterised by respect for each other and was a conference of its own kind. The United Nations family, governments, women and men were all involved. This spirit of unity must prevail. All issues have been discussed and included in the Beijing Declaration but we need to continue to implement it. States need to carry out the promises made in 1995.

As gender equality will not automatically eliminate all of the negative elements of our societies, she asked UNESCO to help in finding the right curricula for schools and to educate people. In this regard she congratulated UNESCO on its work in Tanzania through its literacy programme.

As a key person working toward gender equality in Africa she took examples of progress made in Rwanda but also reminded us of women's suffering in Sudan, in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in Nigeria. She also stressed the tight links between gender equality,



peace and development and invited UNESCO to take the lead, assuring the organisation her full support and cooperation.


Gertrude Mongella stressed that a Fifth World Conference on Women was a good idea but she wondered if it were possible to gather 17,000 people in one place in terms of security and financing.

As the President of the CEDAW Committee, **Nicole Ameline** explained how the Committee uses the Beijing Platform in its work. She stressed the important role of international organisations and national governments in accelerating progress toward gender equality. According to her, the CEDAW Convention is an instrument of universal scope, a reference tool in key domains of equality. The Convention has adopted a transversal approach. She quoted Boutros Boutros Ghali recalling that *“women’s rights are the common ground of Humanity, the irreducible human element, what is not negotiable”*. In her opinion, the greatest challenge to overcome for achieving gender equality post-2015 is the full implementation of the Convention. Moreover, women’s rights need to be consolidated to adequately face conflicts and difficulties such as the current economic crises. She asked for a cross-cutting reflection on law and development. For instance, giving micro credit to women without taking into account that they might not have access to land and property is incomplete. She advocated increasing everything that can help the reinforcement of national capacities and a more effective use and implementation of CEDAW.

Moreover, she took the example of Miss Malala Yousafzai to ask for the full commitment of women and men and call them to fight all forms of oppression. She reminded the audience that while some countries make progress others face backlashes. In a similar vein, **H.E. Dr Masoumeh Ebtekar**, Vice-President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, invited UNESCO and other international organisations to pursue initiatives such as the Iranian President Rouhani’s initiative: the *“World Against Violence and Extremism”*.

According to **Nicole Ameline** the 21st century will be the one of women’s empowerment as a condition to equality and to their freedom. The current context is a challenge to guarantee women’s rights and she asked women to condemn the manipulation of religion. She finished by saying that women’s rights is not only our fight but humanity’s fight.

Tsetska Tsatcheva recalled that 2015 also marks the 15th anniversary of the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. She added that conflict zones represent a major challenge to guaranteeing women’s rights. She underlined the close links between women’s empowerment and sustainable peace. She also mentioned the example of Bulgaria for the advancement of gender equality in politics, in the justice sector, in civil society and in the media.



In the current context, she wished to express the need to define new policies and adopt an adequate legislation to guarantee the protection of the world cultural heritage. According to her, policies must pay special attention to younger generations. Moreover, she recalled that *“we can move forward thanks to the knowledge of testimonies of History and particularities of different cultures but not by cultural cleansing”*.

H.E. Dr Masoumeh Ebtekar, who was an active member of women’s civil society organisations before becoming Vice-President, shared her opinion on how to better integrate NGOs into international and national efforts to promote gender equality post-2015. She suggested that UNESCO collects and compiles women’s experiences acquired in their advancement and struggles for the improvement of their status particularly in their cultural, social and scientific dimensions. This could serve as a practical guideline for international bodies.

Finally, **Hynd Ayoubi Idrissi** recalled the celebration of the International Convention on Population and Development in Cairo. She highlighted that most of the precarious and part-time workers are women. According to her, these inequalities come from people’s perceptions on the role of women as well as women’s own integrated perceptions on the division of work, housework and education. She underlined that women still face resistance to their rights and in particular their sexual rights but that States who have voluntarily committed themselves should implement their obligations.

Moreover, she stressed the need to take into account the process which leads to results and not just the results themselves. The right to development is a third generation right which implies shared responsibilities and solidarity to be implemented. When human rights are violated, judicial remedies must be available. Universal access to justice must be guarantee to every human being, including women living in remote areas and women with disability. She is concerned by corruption as it impedes the enjoyment of rights and liberties and so encouraged the creation of independent institutions to observe and be a remedy in case of human rights violation. She called for the fight against transnational organised criminality and cyber criminality as it is a vector to globalise violence. She concluded saying that the rule of law must prevail in order to achieve a global, sustainable, integrated and transformative agenda.

Women's and Girl's Education

The strategic objective of the Platform for Action concerning equal access to education is probably one of the objectives which have been the most successfully implemented.

Gender parity in primary school and girls' enrolment rate in lower and upper secondary school have improved tremendously. However, millions of girls are still out of school and two thirds of the world's illiterate population are women, which drastically reduce their chances of empowerment. Yet, one of the strategic objectives of the Platform for Action specifically calls for actions to be taken to "*eradicate illiteracy among women*".

Moreover, women teachers are still lacking from countries where a wide gender disparity in enrolment exists. **Hynd Ayoubi Idrissi** highlighted that disparities are increased in the highest level of education.

H.E. Laura Chinchilla stressed the need to invest in people. Costa Rica included the right to education in its Constitution many years ago and the public sector finances public education which represent 90% of pupils. According to her, to reach gender parity in education, the public sector needs to assume the responsibility and not leave it to the private sector. The remaining challenge in Costa Rica is to get women to enrol in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

As a specialized agency in education, UNESCO works toward equal access to quality education as a fundamental right for women and girls in all areas. It has already launched a partnership for Girl's and Women's Education known as the "Better Life, Better Future" campaign and continues its work towards the objectives of *Education For All* (EFA).

UNESCO also encourages women in scientific careers using the "For Women in Science" programme in collaboration with L'Oréal and through the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO.

On 24 February 2015, UNESCO and UN Women announced the launch of a Joint Programme for the Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women through Education. It is a new approach as it takes a life cycle perspective by strengthening the link between education, health, gender equality and empowerment. The aim is to reach adolescent girls and young women at risk of discrimination and exclusion from educational opportunities. The first six targeted countries will be Nepal, Pakistan, Mali, Niger, South Sudan and Tanzania.

- The Joint Programme is moving a step forward toward the achievement of the Beijing Platform for Action objectives.

- It is not enough to only ensure that girls and young women enrol in schools. There must be a holistic and comprehensive approach to education.

Discrimination and Violence against Women

The Beijing Platform calls for “*integrated measures to prevent and eliminate violence against women*” as well as studies on “*the causes and consequences of violence against women and the effectiveness of preventive measures*”.

The panelists stressed the fact that violence against women remains a major problem. 35% of women have experienced some form of violence during their lifetime. Social and cultural norms which lead to violence and discrimination need to be eliminated and countries need to speak with a clear and strong voice to outlaw violence against women. **H.E. Laura Chinchilla** mentioned several means to tackle the issue of violence against women.

Hynd Ayoubi Idrissi highlighted the fact that displaced women are disproportionately affected as they face all sorts of violence such as sexual exploitation.

H.E. Dr Masoumeh Ebtekar was asked about the way to address a new phenomenon which is the use of violence by women in particular as actors of terrorist attacks. **H.E. Dr Masoumeh Ebtekar** recalled the root causes of terrorism and extremism. Injustice, poverty, overconsumption patterns, wars and conflicts created a sense of despair which is a major root for radical ideology. According to her, it requires a lot of teaching and awareness raising on the true message of religion. She recommended interfaith and intercultural dialogues between the North and the South.

Gertrude Mongella added that violence is destroying human life and dignity and deplored the commercialisation of violence. For instance, instead of selling arms to poor countries, she recommended that States bring money in order to improve education and infrastructures.

In this background, UNESCO has 13 programmes which explicitly target violence against women focusing in particular on prevention through education programmes.

- To fight violence against women we need to educate young boys and girls and men and women about gender, so that they understand the importance of equality and respect for all.
- UNESCO will be at the forefront of attempts to promote positive images of women and to eliminate negative stereotypes.

Women's Political Participation and Leadership

While the Platform for Action calls for “*measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making*”, women are still poorly represented in this area.

After reminding the audience of the low number of women in politics, **Tsetska Tsacheva**, President of the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, explained why, according to her, equal participation and representation in politics has been so hard to achieve. She also mentioned several means that can be used to advance women's political participation and leadership and called on the international community to double its efforts to increase the representation of women in politics.

Moreover, she highlighted the most positive impacts of women's political leadership since the Conference of Beijing in 1995. Finally, she talked about how prioritising a human rights framework can help to advance gender equality and women's rights post-2015.

As former President of Costa Rica, **H.E. Laura Chinchilla** was able to share what her experiences taught her about the major challenges to women's rights. She expressed the fact that it is harder for women than men to enter and remain in politics. Women must break the glass ceiling. She regretted that women are judged on how they look and not on what they have to say. Furthermore, she highlighted the need to ensure women's participation through legislative reforms and to work on eliminating discriminatory norms. In pointing out the main obstacles faced by women she included cultural barriers, especially the idea that power is associated with men, the uneven share of domestic work and the difficulty of finding financial support in political campaigns. She recommended looking at other countries' legislation to only use what is effectively working.

Gertrude Mongella expressed her deep disappointment at the misuse of power and the fact that business cannot continue to be handled the way it currently is.

As a woman leader, **H.E. Dr Masoumeh Ebtekar** highlighted the obstacles to women's leadership and the way to overcome them. She stressed the low number of women in decision making positions. Furthermore, she pointed out that “*decisions are not made based on compassion and shared human values*” and wondered if reintroducing feminine personality traits would bring a fundamental change in our approach to leadership. According to her, “*the world is suffering from the lack of peace, gender equality and justice*”

partly due to politicians who govern world affairs while lacking this inner equilibrium and peace”.

As a female politician, **Nicole Ameline** recalled that equality does not only mean that women must benefit from public policies but also that they must be political decision makers themselves. Women must impose themselves in the political debate.

- UNESCO will work to empower women with the skills and confidence to take their rightful place in political leadership and decision making.
- We need to work with men to ensure that they understand the value of women’s role in politics and that they will work together to promote gender equality through policy.


Women and the Environment

As the panelists stressed, environmental disasters impact women and girls disproportionately and a major remaining issue concerns the access to a good quality water source.

Panelists agreed that the strategic objective of the Beijing Platform to *“involve women actively in environmental decision-making at all levels”* still needs to be implemented. Yet the environment would directly benefit from a greater involvement of women in environmental sustainability, access to water and disaster risk management.

During her Presidential mandate, **H.E. Laura Chinchilla** promoted environmental issues. Costa Rica is one of the greenest countries in the world. She underlined the importance of gender equality in sustainable development and the protection of the environment but acknowledged that a greater sustainable development does not guarantee that the condition of women will improve automatically.

Women’s key role in prevention and management of disasters was also stressed. As a UNEP “Champion of the Earth”, **H.E. Dr Masoumeh Ebtekar** talked about the intersection between gender equality and environmental protection and the need to have them linked in the post-2015 agenda. For instance, women manage resources; they think of their own future but also include the future of their children and of the Earth in general. Working for women is working for peace and sustainability for Humanity. She gave the example of an Iranian project to educate farmers on agricultural practices in order to manage water resources in a sustainable way. She highlighted that *“climate change is now considered as the major threat for the future of life on Earth”*. According to her, the suppression of feminine attributes has *“led to an untamed desire to conquer nature and to impose human law on the ecosystem”*. She calls for a change in our mentality and a respect towards nature. Finally, she called for a



holistic approach to be taken and acknowledged that UNESCO has a leading role to play as it is a scientific, cultural, educational and spiritual issue.

In the same vein, **H.E. Laura Chinchilla** added that compassion and solidarity are associated with the feminine condition and that what we need are collaborative actions. The fact that women give birth to new life makes them very sensitive to the conservation of life on Earth.

- Women’s knowledge and experiences of their ecosystems are fundamental and need to be taken into account to encourage a sustainable development in post-2015.
- Women need to be trained in terms of use and conservation of resources.
- Environmental risks and social inequalities need to be addressed together.


Women and the Media

Two of the Beijing Platform’s objectives concern the *“increase of women’s access and participation to expression and decision making in and through the media and new technologies of communication”* as well as a more *“balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media”*.

According to **Gertrude Mongella** media are doing more harm than good to people as they communicate violence instead of peace.

H.E. Dr Masoumeh Ebtekar deplores the *“abuse by the corporate media of the feminine archetype to reduce it to a base object for promoting consumerism and a culture of carelessness and irresponsible behavior”* and calls for the end of the systematic degradation of women’s dignity. Moreover, she highlighted the destructive cultural influence of the media in the name of freedom of expression which she considered to be unethical.

Over the past 15 years there has been noticeable but very slow change. These objectives do not receive systematic global attention. Yet the media are essential to achieve them. Currently, 76% of the people in the news are male and only 6% of news highlight issues of gender equality or inequality. Moreover, women represent only 19% of spokespersons and 20% of experts interviewed or heard in the news. In this respect, the *Women Make the News* programme is launched each year on International Women’s Day to raise awareness on gender equality in and through the media. The theme for this year is **“Yes we must! Reaching Gender Equality in the Media by 2030”**.



In collaboration with the International Federation of Journalists, UNESCO has developed Gender-Sensitive Media Indicators. It also launched a Global Alliance on Media and Gender (GAMAG) to ensure a systematic follow-up in this area. Finally, UNESCO works to increase the participation and visibility of women by empowering local radios.

- Women Makes the News 2015 will promote an increase in female sources interviewed in the news to at least 30%.
- The media need to be trained to reduce stereotyped portrayals of women, mainstream gender considerations and challenge gender inequality in their work. In this regard, UNESCO supports the training of reporters and media-related groups through the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC).
- UNESCO is currently conducting a Global Survey on Gender and Media on public policies undertaken by Member States.



Conclusion

Twenty years ago, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action placed women's rights on the international stage. It remains a powerful source of guidance and inspiration worldwide. It put in motion tremendous work toward the empowerment of women and gender equality. Significant progress has been made in the twelve critical areas of concern and in particular in education. However, there are large discrepancies between the domains and there is still a lot to be done to fully achieve the hopes of the 17,000 participants at the Beijing Conference.

The panelists identified some key challenges for the next steps in achieving gender equality. Key suggestions were also made to strengthen UNESCO's programmes and activities to ensure that women's rights stay at the heart of all of our agendas. Indeed, one cannot hope for a better future if the achievement of women's rights is not a priority for everyone. All the panelists agreed that gender equality must not be segregated from the agenda but instead must in at the heart of it and mainstreamed in every domain. The Beijing Platform's objectives will only be achieved if international organisations, Member States, civil society and NGOs work assiduously together toward a future that is mindful of women's issues and respectful of women's rights and gender equality.

Against this background, UNESCO reiterates its commitment to promote women's empowerment, women's rights and gender equality in all its domains of competence, to intensify efforts to eliminate gender-based violence and to ensure equal access to quality education for all.

In her concluding remarks, UNESCO's Director-General, **Irina Bokova** quoted Miss Malala Yousafzai, inviting everyone to be "committed and stubborn" to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment.