



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
la science et la culture

Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
науки и культуры

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 Opening Ceremony for the Global Women Leaders
Forum**

National Art Gallery, Sofia, Bulgaria, 18 May 2016

Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of the People's Republic of Bangladesh,

Honourable Ms Tsetska Tsacheva, Chairperson of the National Assembly of Bulgaria,

Ms Boriana Manolova, CEO of Siemens Bulgaria, Chairperson of the *Council of Women in Business in Bulgaria*,

Ms Viktoria Blajeva, from UniCredit Bulbank, and our host tonight,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First, allow me to thank our partners from the *Council of Women in Business in Bulgaria* for their support in this initiative.

I am delighted to speak before you in this great place of beauty, history and culture.

As a Bulgarian, the *National Art Gallery of Sofia* holds special significance for me.

This is perhaps the most appropriate place to celebrate the opening of the *Global Women Leaders' Forum*, because we stand not far from an exhibition of historic importance – a collection of portraits depicting leaders from the past...

The same image pervades all of them – this is an image representing only one gender.

Times have changed, and images of leadership today are different, but steep challenges remain.

Inequality between women and men remains a major obstacle for progress.

This violates human rights.

This constrains creativity and talent.

This suffocates inclusion and pluralism.

This does not just harm women – it weakens the very fabric of societies.

It throws a shadow over the sustainability of development in the 21st century, and it undermines the grounds for peace.

Twenty-one years ago, the world adopted the Declaration and Platform for Action in Beijing, reaffirming “*the human rights of women and girls are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights.*”

Last year, the world renewed its commitment to this fundamental principle on three occasions -- at the 20th anniversary of the *Beijing Declaration*, with the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, with the *Paris Climate Change Agreement*.

This is the message of this *Global Women Leaders Forum*.

We need to educate girls to become leaders.

We need to nurture new women leaders.

We need to shine light on women who are already leading.

These goals guide all UNESCO's action to advance gender equality.

Millennium Development Goals catalysed progress across the world, but we remain far off target – this is my first message at the opening of this Forum.

The figures are staggering, and we must not tire in repeating them.

Only 60 percent of countries have achieved parity in primary education -- only 38 percent in secondary.

62 million girls are still denied the right to a basic education.

Being born a girl remains a primary cause for exclusion today.

Too many girls, in too many countries, are forced to work, married off, taken from school.

This is unacceptable.

Especially since this challenge is not unsurmountable -- this is my second message.

We can change the situation, if we act together, backed by strong will, adequate resources, effective joined-up policies.

Examples abound that show what can and should be done.

I wish to highlight here the leadership of Bangladesh, and especially Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who honours us with her presence today.

Prime Minister, thanks to you, Bangladesh has become one of the developing world's success stories in achieving the Millennium Development Goals, in food security, in poverty reduction, in education and gender equality.

The statistics speak for themselves.

Extreme poverty has been cut by half -- maternal mortality has been reduced by 40 percent in a decade -- today Bangladesh is one of only a few low-income countries to have more girls in school than boys.

Excellency, your leadership inspires all of us.

Last year, you said that “*world leaders should keep their promises,*” and I believe this highlights a core feature of all leadership.

This is the responsibility, the duty, the task, we all face today, to make true the commitments the world took last year.

We need to act across the board, starting as early as possible, beginning on the benches of schools, to support girls and young women, to nurture them as leaders, today and tomorrow.

In 2011, UNESCO launched the *Better Life, Better Future Initiative*, in the presence of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina – this has spurred innovative alliances to empower adolescent girls and young women.

In Myanmar, with Ericsson, we recently launched a project to empower women and girls through mobile technology.

In March last year, we joined forces with UN Women and UNFPA to launch a *Joint Programme for Empowering Adolescent Girls and Young Women through Education*, to keep girls in school by acting on multiple fronts and working with health and labour ministries.

Last October in Pakistan, we launched the *Girls’ Right to Education Programme*, to support access, improved teacher training and community action in hard-to-reach areas of the country.

I am inspired by every young girl and women I meet – from Afghanistan to Pakistan, South Sudan to Jordan, in the IDP camps in Iraq and refugee camps in Jordan.

They aspire to be their country’s teachers, scientists, journalists, doctors and politicians -- we must support them in every way.

Empowering girls and women is the heart of the 2030 Agenda – we must target the weak points, the bottlenecks, with a focus on adolescent girls.

I am convinced the face of the new agenda is a 12 year old girl, living and learning safely, in school, not forced into marriage or into work.

She is the future leader the world needs.

She must be at the front of every effort we take.

In this spirit, I thank you for your commitment – for your leadership – and look forward to our exchanges.

As Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said, we must keep our promises.

That is why we are here today.

This is UNESCO's determination and my personal pledge.

Thank you.