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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 first Award Ceremony for the UNESCO Prize for  
Girls' and Women's Education**

**Beijing, 6 June 2016**

Professor Peng Liyuan, First Lady of China, *UNESCO Special Envoy for Girls' and Women's Education*,

Excellency Mr Yuan Guiren, Minister of Education of China,

Excellency Mr Li Baodong, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of China,

Excellency Mr Hao Ping, Vice Minister of Education, and Chairperson of the National Commission of China to UNESCO, and until 6 months ago, President of UNESCO's General Conference,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Prizewinners,

I am particularly honoured and moved to attend the first award ceremony of the *UNESCO Prize for Girls' and Women's Education*, generously funded by the People's Republic of China.

Professor Peng Liyuan, dear friend if you may allow me, I wish to thank you for your life-long commitment to advancing the empowerment of girls and women, embodied also in your action as *UNESCO Special Envoy for Girls' and Women's Education*.

We saw this in the *International Seminar on Girls' and Women's Education* you led in Beijing last September.

We saw this in the *High-Level Event on the Global Education First Initiative* we held later that month at the United Nations in New York, with Malala Yousafzai, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate.

All this reflects values with deep roots in China.

The value of learning.

The value of equal rights and dignity.

In his historic speech to UNESCO, on 27 March, 2014, President Xi Jinping said:

*Education can open peoples' mind, impart knowledge and cultivate temperament.*

This is especially important for girls and women.

Last September, President Xi chaired the *Global Leaders' Meeting on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment* at the United Nations in New York, marking the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 4<sup>th</sup> *World Conference on Women* in Beijing.

President Xi called for an unremitting commitment by all to empowering girls and women, starting with education.

We have seen progress across the world -- but not enough.

Girls and young women still face steep barriers to entering education, from poverty, from prejudice, from violence.

They are still forced from school, married young, held back by early pregnancies.

There are 32 million girls out of primary school today — the number of excluded adolescent girls is higher.

In 2015, some 481 million women 15 years old and over lack basic literacy skills.

Women still represent 64 percent of the world's illiterate adults.

We know girls and women shoulder the heaviest burden of conflict and crisis situations.

I am convinced that lasting peace and sustainable development are simply unthinkable while such inequality persists.

I am convinced this is a challenge we can overcome.

This idea stands at the heart of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* -- specifically Sustainable Development Goal 4, which UNESCO helped shape, to ensure “*inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.*”

Taking this forward calls for recognizing innovation, rewarding commitment, catalysing new action.

The *UNESCO Prize for Girls and Women’s Education* jointly with China shines the spotlight on heroes of education.

It highlights the power of partnership, with parents and teachers, with communities, with governments.

It shows what can be done to empower girls and women across the world.

The *Directorate for Early Childhood Education* in Indonesia is devoted to improving girls access to and quality education from an early age.

The *Female Students Network Trust* in Zimbabwe seeks to empower female students in tertiary education.

Together, they show the power of innovative action – starting with early childhood care and education, essential for future achievement, vital for the most vulnerable girls – including a focus on higher education, to empower women for leadership.

I thank and congratulate the *Directorate for Early Childhood Education* in Indonesia and the *Female Students Network Trust* in Zimbabwe for their very inspiring work.

Allow me once again to thank the Government of China for its leadership.

I once again thank Professor Peng Liyuan, First Lady of China, for sharing your passion.

This has never been so important in this year when the world turns to implement a new agenda for humanity, for the planet and for peace, one whose main ambition is to leave no one behind.

Thank you very much.