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Address by
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(UNESCO)

at the opening of the International Round Table “Women in Politics”,
held on the occasion of the celebration of International Women’s Day

UNESCO, 8 March 2006

Madam President,
Mr President of the General Conference,
Excellencies,
Honourable Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to UNESCO today on the occasion of this year's International Women's Day.

It is my great honour and pleasure to welcome the President of Liberia, Her Excellency Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, to UNESCO House. Her presence is a particular honour indeed as this, I believe, is the first visit she has made to the headquarters of any UN body since she became President of her country. As a former Director of UNDP's Africa Bureau, she is doubly welcome as a valued colleague from the UN family at large.

Madam President,

At a moment when, under your leadership, Liberia has set out on the path of democratic renewal and reinvigorated national development, you can be assured of our support. To succeed in your vital mission, you need the backing of the whole nation as well as the support of friends, partners and well-wishers from the entire international community. For its part, UNESCO stands ready and is committed to support you, together with other partner agencies of the UN system, in the undertaking you have embarked upon. In November 2004, I paid an official visit to Liberia in order to strengthen our relations of cooperation with your country during its difficult transitional phase. I hereby reaffirm our strong commitment to support and assist Liberia, especially in the area of education which is crucial for national reconstruction.

I am also very pleased to welcome four distinguished female ministers for our panel discussion: Madam Nada Haffadh, Minister of Health of Bahrain; Madam Blanca Ovelar de Duarte, Minister of Education and Culture of Paraguay; Madam Zubaida Jalal, Minister for Welfare and Special Education of Pakistan; and Madam Chinwe Obaji, Minister of Education of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and president of her country's National Commission for UNESCO. Clearly, Bahrain, Paraguay, Pakistan and Nigeria are providing examples of how women can be fully involved in the political processes of their countries.

Finally, I extend a warm welcome to the other panelists and participants who have accepted my invitation to join us today for a discussion of the main theme of International Women's Day, namely, 'Women in Politics'.

Madam President,
Mr President of the General Conference,
Distinguished Guests,

Worldwide, 8 March is recognized as a day of reflection about the quest for gender equality – for both taking stock of the road traveled and for mobilizing actions to achieve the goals and targets necessary for women’s empowerment. Indeed, this day offers all who are engaged in the daily struggle for women’s advancement – women and men alike – a chance to gather new strength and inspiration by learning from and sharing experiences with women who have climbed the political ladder.

It is auspicious that the theme of today’s celebrations and discussions coincides with a momentous year for women in politics, heralded by the inauguration of the first elected female president in Africa – our keynote speaker today – and the election of the first female president in Chile, Michelle Bachelet. Their successful elections give hope for further development and concrete accomplishments towards more gender-balanced governments, parliaments and institutions – a fundamental precondition for genuine democracy.

The idea that women’s political leadership is linked with improved prospects for peace and socio-economic progress is based on a long-standing perception that, in practice, it is women who are the real architects and makers of peace. Liberia and Chile are examples of societies where women and men have put their collective trust in accomplished women leaders, confident that they will be able to heal the wounds left by war and dictatorship.

At this point, let me draw your attention to the photo exhibition, part of today’s celebratory events, on the first woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. This exhibition, organized in collaboration with the Permanent Delegation of Austria to UNESCO, provides an opportunity to mark the 100th anniversary of Bertha von Suttner’s receipt of that prestigious award. Bertha von Suttner had, of course, several worthy and distinguished female successors who also received this high international recognition, including Wangari Maathai and Shirin Ebadi, both of whom have strong links with UNESCO.

Madam President,
Mr President of the General Conference,
Distinguished Guests,

Globally, we have reasons to believe that the tide is beginning to turn in women’s favour. At the 2005 UN World Summit in New York last September, the world’s leaders made a strong commitment to foster women’s empowerment in all domains, especially to promote increased representation of women in government

decision-making bodies, and to ensure their equal opportunity to participate fully in the political process. The task now is to translate these political commitments at the highest level into reality at all levels.

There is a critical link between development and the political empowerment of women, as underlined in the 2005 World Summit Outcome document. Through its programmes and activities, UNESCO is strongly committed to enhancing gender equality and to promoting the participation of women in political decision-making. Gender mainstreaming in all UNESCO programmes and at all stages of the programming cycle is a firm commitment. Furthermore, I have recently made gender mainstreaming training mandatory for all staff, including directors, at headquarters and field offices.

On this International Women's Day in 2006, UNESCO reaffirms its full commitment to efforts promoting women's empowerment and full participation in decision-making at all levels and invites all its partners to join in this endeavour to build a future where gender equality is universal.

Thank you.