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pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture

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

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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 the Exhibition “Girls’ Voices: Speaking Out Against Child  
Marriage”**

**UNESCO, 11 October 2016**

Excellency Ms Elaine Ayotte, Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of Canada to  
UNESCO,

Excellencies Ambassadors,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to UNESCO for this exhibition that echoes with the voices of girls from  
around the world.

These voices are especially powerful, because we open this exhibition on the  
occasion of the *International Day of the Girl Child*.

I wish to thank *Girls, Not Brides* and the Government of Canada for this initiative, and  
for their outstanding advocacy on an issue crossing all regions.

Today, more than ever, we must join forces to defend the human rights and dignity  
of every girl child, everywhere.

There are 1.1 billion girls in the world today.

The world must keep the promises made one year ago, in the *2030 Agenda for  
Sustainable Development*.

The face of the 2030 Agenda are the faces of the girls we see here today.

It is the faces and the stories of Zinenani... of Jennifer... of Salma... of Nancy... of Mamosala... who speak for the lives of 15 million girls every year reported to enter a marriage before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

15 million is also the number of girls of primary school age currently out of school who will never set foot in a classroom.

These are stories of hardship, poverty and discrimination.

For Zinenani, for instance, marriage was seen as a solution to escape poverty.

For others, the practice of child, early or forced marriage is part of a set of traditional and cultural norms.

These practices harm the wellbeing of girls and threaten their education -- leading girls to drop out of school prematurely -- rendering them vulnerable to abuse and deprivation -- increasing the risk of maternal or infant deaths.

There are positive signs.

The *Girls, not Brides Progress Report* shows the practice of child marriage is declining globally, particularly for girls under the age of 15.

But child marriage is far from eliminated, and it continues to throw a shadow over the lives of millions of girls, their families, their communities, their societies.

We have been given a deadline – 2030 – it is our responsibility to achieve it.

This is why we must draw on the full transformational power of education.

All studies point in the same direction.

A secondary education reduces early marriage, child and maternal mortality, and improves the health and nutrition of families.

If all girls received primary and secondary education in sub-Saharan Africa, in South Asia and in West Asia, child marriage would fall by 64 percent.

We all know the crucial importance of the adolescent years, as a transition period between childhood and adulthood, when girls *can* break intergenerational cycles of poverty, violence, exclusion, when their lives can dramatically improve – if we help them, if we make the most of education, if we engage parents and communities, to transform attitudes and social norms that fuel harmful practices, like child marriage.

Education is a basic human right – it is also an amplifier for the voices of girls around the world.

Mesdames et Messieurs,

Omaima, réfugiée syrienne de 14 ans, a lancé une campagne pour mettre un terme au mariage des enfants dans le camp de Za'atari en Jordanie après qu'une de ses amies ait abandonné l'école de façon inattendue.

Omaima n'a jamais revu son amie.

Elle n'avait pas 13 ans, elle a été mariée de force.

Nous devons soutenir ces filles, et nous devons soutenir la campagne d'Omaima.

Nous devons soutenir Meena, qui fait partie d'un groupe de jeunes filles et de garçons appelés les « casseurs de mariage », qui font campagne contre la pratique du mariage des enfants au Bangladesh.

Ils visitent les familles et parlent de l'importance de la formation continue.

Nous devons soutenir Humphrey, qui a lancé l'initiative "Tendre une main vers l'Ouganda" qui donne aux jeunes les connaissances nécessaires pour faire des choix et prendre des décisions éclairées.

Humphrey a vu sa propre sœur contrainte de se marier jeune.

Omaima, Meena et Humphrey sont une inspiration pour tous, et nous devons intensifier nos efforts à leurs côtés.

Le mariage des enfants est un problème mondial et nous devons travailler ensemble pour y mettre fin.

La place d'une jeune fille de 12 ans, 13 ans, est à l'école, et nulle part ailleurs.

Nous sommes réunis aujourd'hui pour défendre leur droit, pour réaffirmer ce message et prendre action pour changer le cours des choses.

Je vous remercie.