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Message from Irina Bokova,

Director-General of UNESCO

on the occasion of International Women's Day

8 March 2010

This year marks the 15th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, a landmark event that produced the most progressive and comprehensive policy statement to date on gender equality. Beijing energized women from all walks of life and placed their empowerment at the core of the global development agenda. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is a reference for assessing progress towards equal rights and opportunities in all spheres and identifying the significant challenges that still remain.

The battle for gender equality is far from won. Of the world's one billion poorest people, three-fifths are girls and women. Girls still account for more than half the world's out-of-school children; two-thirds of the 759 million adult illiterates are female. Women are under-represented in political decision-making. They are often trapped in insecure low-paid positions; more vulnerable in times of economic and financial crisis and more exposed to violence in situations of armed conflict.

This is why we have to seize every opportunity in 2010 to press for top-level attention to gender equality. This March, the Commission on the Status of Women is reviewing the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. In July, the United Nations Economic and Social Council will put the spotlight on progress towards Millennium Development Goal Three, on promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, and look at comprehensive strategies for moving forward. Next September, the United Nations Secretary-General has called on world leaders to attend a summit to boost progress towards the Millennium Development Goals five years away from the 2015 target date for achieving them.

Fifteen years ago, I participated in the Beijing Conference. As the first woman elected to the post of Director-General of UNESCO, I am deeply committed to advancing the rights of girls and women in education, science, culture, communications and information. Gender Equality is one of our global strategic priorities. The aim is to ensure that all our programmes contribute fully to empowering women.

All forms of discrimination on the basis of gender are violations of human rights and a significant barrier to peace and sustainable development. Women's rights are human rights that must be promoted, upheld and enforced.

International Women's Day is a time to celebrate the victories of women the world over. As societies grapple with multiple challenges from economic to environmental, I invite all UNESCO's partners to make equal rights and equal opportunities for girls and women a top priority in all policies. It is the condition of a more secure, just and peaceful world.

Irina Bokova