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Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
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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 Women in Parliament Forum 2015

“Empowering Women Leadership”

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 23 March 2015

Excellency Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Chairperson of the African Union Commission,

Commissioner Neven Mimica,

Speaker of the House of Parliament HE Tekleberhan,

HE Joyce Banda, Former President of Malawi, Honourable Bethel,

Ms Silvana Koch-Mehrin, Founder of Women in Parliaments, former Vice-President of the European Parliament,

Carlos Lopes, Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa,

Dear Friends,

Honourable Members of Parliament,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for this opportunity to speak before the *Women in Parliaments Annual Summit*, a very impressive global gathering of women parliamentarians and politicians.

This has special meaning to me personally.

I was member of the parliament of Bulgaria for two terms.

These were some of the most important and passionate years of my political career.

I know the importance of parliaments and I know the importance of women in parliaments.

I am especially honoured to speak in this splendid hall named after the man who changed the history of the continent and the world.

In his first State of the Nation address, in 1994, President Nelson Mandela declared:

Freedom cannot be achieved unless women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression.

UNESCO started its year-long celebrations of its 70th anniversary in November 2014 with the Mandela Day to pay respect to a great humanist.

Mandela said these words just one year before the *4th World Conference on Women* held in Beijing.

I was honoured to be in Beijing in 1995, as a member of the Delegation from Bulgaria, and I recall vividly the energy of that moment.

We mark this year the 20th anniversary of the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* – and I have just returned from the 59th session of the *Commission on the Status of Women*, which explored achievements and sought to mobilise all to tackle new challenges.

There has been tremendous progress across the world since 1995.

Maternal mortality has been cut by almost half.

There have been strong steps towards parity for girls and boys in primary school.

More and more women are active in politics.

Africa, for one, boasts 14 out of the world's 46 countries where women account for more than a quarter of Parliamentarians.

The Economist magazine estimated the increase of employment of women in developed countries during the last decade has added more to global growth than China.

But steep challenges remain.

Women represent only one in five parliamentarians.

Only 20 national leaders in the world are women.

Five of the world's parliaments have no women representatives, and there are eight governments with no women ministers at all.

The situation is stark in education.

Girls and women are still the majority of out-of-school children, youth and illiterate adults.

According to UNESCO's *Global Monitoring Report on Education for All*, there are 31 million girls who should be in primary school but are not, and the number is higher for the secondary.

By 2011, only 63 percent of countries had achieved gender parity at primary level, and only 38 percent of countries at secondary level.

In sub-Saharan Africa, if trends continue, the richest boys will achieve universal primary completion in 2021 -- while the poorest girls will wait until 2086.

Across the world, there remain 493 million illiterate women.

Too many girls, in too many countries, are held back because they are girls.

They are forced to work, married off, taken away from school.

Recent analysis by the *UNESCO Global Monitoring Report* shows school-related gender-based violence to be far too prevalent.

This situation is not acceptable.

In order to get access to economic resources, women have to be educated; they have to have the necessary skills.

Inequality condemns individuals to poverty, it undermines the health of societies, it curtails opportunities for sustainable growth.

I know I am preaching to the converted, but we must never tire in sharing our message.

Gender equality is a human right.

Gender equality is a development multiplier.

Gender equality is a force for peace.

We have no more powerful transformational force, and this starts on the benches of schools.

Education is the breakthrough strategy for human development.

It gives voice, encourages civic participation, and widens opportunities on the labour market.

According to UNESCO's *Global Monitoring Report*, if all girls had primary education in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia, child marriage would fall by 14 percent.

If they had secondary education -- this would fall by 64 percent.

This is why gender equality and education must stand at the heart of the global sustainable development agenda States are shaping this year.

Let underline here the importance of the parliamentary voice in crafting the new agenda, to strengthen its link to the aspirations of citizens in every society.

We need to get the new global agenda right – we must also act on the ground.

This spirit guides the partnership between the African Union and UNESCO.

I commend the African Union and African Heads of State and Government for the declaration of 2015 as the *Year of Women's Empowerment and Development towards Africa's Agenda 2063*.

This marks the 20th anniversary of the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, as well as the 5th anniversary of the *African Women's Decade (2010-2020)* and 15th anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

UNESCO is deeply committed to supporting implementation of the *African Union Commission Strategic Plan for 2014-2017*.

I have built the priorities of this plan into the UNESCO *Operational Strategy for Priority Africa* – including the goal to “mainstream the participation of women and the youth in all priorities and activities of the Union and the continent.”

I recall well the conference we held at UNESCO in 2012, with Dr Dlamini-Zuma, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Panafrican Woman Organization.

In follow-up, in the framework of UNESCO's 70th anniversary, we will launch this year a publication on the Panafrican Women Organization – to highlight the leadership of African women in shaping the continent today.

In the same spirit, UNESCO launched with the African Union Commission an award-winning e-learning tool called “Women in African History”, to pay tribute to the role of women in Africa's emancipation and development.

“Nobody tells the story that African women are at the forefront of development.”

These are the words of Dr Dlamini-Zuma, so we started to tell this story jointly with the African Union, and this tool seeks precisely to tell this story, drawing on the power of new technologies.

These same convictions guide UNESCO in its action across the world.

In Afghanistan, we have reached 600,000 learners with literacy, with women and girls as a priority.

In Iraq, we have set up Community Learning Centres to provide literacy to girls and women.

In Pakistan, we are targeting girls and women with literacy skills, and I launched last year the Malala Fund for Girls' Right to Education, with the Government of Pakistan.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, UNESCO has established a *Regional Research and Documentation Centre for Women, Gender and Peace-building in the Great Lakes Region*, to prevent gender-based violence and promote women's role in peacebuilding.

In Ghana, The Gambia, Nigeria and Liberia, UNESCO has launched a woman's leadership training programme.

In Morocco and Tunisia, we are working to promote women's leadership within political parties.

With South Sudan, where 88 percent of women are illiterate, UNESCO is helping the Government implement its first education strategy.

I am convinced we need new forms of "soft power", working with governments, with civil society, with the private sector.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is about leadership.

Girls and women are already pioneering change across the world, in schools, in communities, in parliaments -- we must recognize this role and multiply it ever more.

Last July, I went to South Sudan and met a young women student who read to me the following poem she had written:

Education is a sword that cuts and chops

The edges of illiteracy, ignorance and indolence

This is precisely why we must do everything to support the right of girls and women to education, to eliminate illiteracy and ignorance.

Let me also mention the example of Malala Yousafzai, who was attacked on 9 October 2012, in Pakistan and who was jointly awarded the Nobel peace prize in 2014 with Kailash Satyarti

Malala was shot, precisely because she is a leader.

I was honoured to attend the Nobel Prize ceremony in Oslo on 10 December, when Malala said:

I am just a committed and stubborn person, who wants to see every child getting quality education, who wants equal rights for women and peace in every corner of the world.

This is leadership.

Well, let us all be stubborn and more dedicated.

As women parliamentarians, I believe you know the importance of this message more than anyone, I wish thank each of you for your leadership, and, in this hall, I pledge that I will do everything to empower girls and women, everywhere, in every society.

I see this as the most important human rights issue for the 21st century.