



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
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Organisation
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Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
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Организация
Объединенных Наций по
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Director, Division for Gender Equality,

Office of the Director-General

International Women's Day 2011

100 Years of International Women's Day

Saniye Gülser Corat

**8 March 2011, Tuesday
11:00am-12:30pm, Room II
UNESCO Headquarters**

Director-General

Ms Barankitse, "Maggy" or as she is known in her country, "the angel of Burundi"

Excellencies

Colleagues

2010 was a landmark year. We remembered the dreams and aspirations of all those who were in Beijing at the fourth and last International Conference for Women 15 years ago. Our Director-General was in Beijing. Heads of states and governments gathered in New York in September again in 2010 to reflect on the progress towards achieving the targets of the Millennium Development Goals. It was a year for reflecting on the past and looking to the future. What we saw was not very encouraging but it was not so bad that led us to lose hope in the future.

2011 is also a landmark; it marks the centenary of the first International Women's Day celebrations back in 1911, when the efforts of suffragette movements around the world began winning tangible recognition for women and their rights.

A century later, in 2011 we are still pushing for the equal rights of women in education, in economic, political and social lives of their communities and countries.

At UNESCO, we are moving by leaps and bounds to live up to our policy commitments in our Medium-Term Strategy to promote women's rights, women's empowerment and gender equality under the strong and unwavering leadership of our Director-General. A vision of humanity as united, rather than divided, lies at the heart of UNESCO's mission. It also lies at the heart of a universal ethics for this globalized world that our Director-General has been calling new humanism. This vision is about sustainability, it is about turning words into actions.

Today's event is a landmark IWD event for UNESCO. On International Women's Day, we are focusing on two issues which cut across all of UNESCO's domains of action. In particular, as gender equality is one of our two global priorities and educating girls and women is at the top of our agenda.

The mutually reinforcing powers of combining gender equality and education remind me of a now famous quote by Queen Rania. Speaking of the MDGs, she noted that they are the only case where $2+3=8$, given the cross-cutting benefits MDGs 2 and 3 - education for all and gender equality –on all the other goals.

The gender divide does not follow mathematical rules. With gender, when we add one to one, we still get 1 – or at least not quite two. We get half of what we could get, if we were able to learn to multiply

human potential, rather than divide humanity in two. This said, from another perspective, the solution lies precisely in making sure that one plus one does equal one – one humanity united rather than divided by multiple factors of discrimination.

Our Director-General and our colleague from the Global Monitoring Team gave us a lot of food for thought on education and gender equality. Maggy told us a very touching and inspiring story.

So, rather than repeating all that is already said and so eloquently, allow me to talk a little about the history of International Women's Day.

In 1911, International Women's Day (IWD) was honored for the first time in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland on 19 March. More than one million women and men attended IWD rallies campaigning for women's rights to work, to vote, to be trained, to hold public office and to end discrimination.

Is it not odd that one hundred years later, we are still fighting and campaigning for exactly the same rights and to end discrimination? The only form of discrimination, I might add, that is still allowed to exist, to take new and more serious forms and one that is even endorsed by some groups, including women themselves.

Let me continue with the history:

In 1977 the United Nations established 8 March as the International Women's Day. Women's organizations and governments around the world began to observe IWD annually by holding large-scale events

that honor women's advancement while diligently reminding us of the need for continued vigilance and action required to ensure that women's equality is gained and maintained in all aspects of life.

2000 and beyond

IWD is now an official holiday in many countries from **Afghanistan**, [*Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, China (for women only), Cuba, Georgia, Guinea-Bissau, Eritrea, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Madagascar (for women only), Moldova, Mongolia, Montenegro, Nepal (for women only), Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uganda, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and*] to **Zambia**.

The tone and nature of IWD has, for the past few years, -at least for 6 years here at UNESCO- moved from being a reminder about the negatives to a celebration of the positives. In the past 6 years, I, for one, always focused on the positives and the achievements.

But allow me to voice some concern this year. The 21st century is witnessing a change and attitudinal shift in our thinking regarding women's empowerment and gender equality. While many from younger generations feel that all the battles have been won for girls and women, many others, especially those from the generations of the 60s and the 70s are concerned because they know that hard won battles are not fully institutionalized. Even though there are more women in the labor force, in boardrooms, although there is greater equality in legislative rights, and an increased critical mass of women's visibility as impressive role models in every aspect of life,

we are still far from achieving our objective of gender equality no matter what criteria we use. During times of crisis, be it economic, political or social, it is the girls and women who pay the heaviest price with their labor, sacrifices and suffering. Battles are fought over women's bodies, over control of their lives and minds.

So each one of us has the obligation, the duty – like Maggy here, like our Director-General – to make a difference. We need to think globally and act locally! Every single woman and every single man has to do their bit to ensure that the future for girls and boys is bright, equal, safe and rewarding.

I would like to conclude by quoting from the speech of Susan B. Anthony, the woman who cast an “illegal” vote in the 1872 elections in the US – “illegal” because women did not have the right to vote. She was tried and fined US\$ 100 but refused to pay.

She said and I quote:

“The only question left to be settled now is: Are women persons? And I hardly believe any of our opponents will have the hardihood to say they are not. Being persons, then, women are citizens, and no state has a right to make any law, or to enforce any old law, that shall abridge their privileges or immunities. Hence, every discrimination against women in the constitutions and laws [*and practices*]* of any state or [*institution*]* is today null and void [...].”

Thank you.

*italics, my additions