PRESS RELEASE

International Women’s Day, 8 March 2006
Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura,
Director-General of UNESCO

BANGKOK, 8 March 2006- Each year, International Women’s Day is a moment for taking stock of the progress made as well as the challenges ahead regarding the achievement of the UN system-wide goal of gender equality through women’s empowerment. The world’s leaders re-committed themselves to this goal at the UN Summit last September. Progress for women is indeed progress for all.

The world’s leaders also resolved to promote “increased representation of women in Government decision-making bodies, including through ensuring their equal opportunity to participate fully in the political process”. In the same vein, Security Council resolution 1325 urged Member States “to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict”. Thus, it is entirely appropriate that the United Nations chose “Women in Decision-Making” as the theme for this year’s celebration of International Women’s Day.

Enhanced female political representation requires increased political participation, which in turn necessitates concrete actions to enhance women’s capacity to participate in leadership tasks, decision-making processes and associated institutions. All UN entities are committed to this agenda of empowerment. For its part, UNESCO sees its programmes in the field of education, including its role as the global coordinator of the Education for All (EFA) movement, as central to its action in this area. It is first and foremost through education that we can address and rectify inequalities and fight against ignorance, intolerance, discrimination and stereotypes.

In its efforts to build women’s capacities, UNESCO works closely with Governments, civil society stakeholders, the private sector and the media. To this end, at its last session in October 2005 the General Conference of UNESCO approved the establishment of the International Centre for Women’s and Girls’ Education in Africa, under the auspices of UNESCO, with the goal of “promoting the genuine participation of women in decision-making at the community, national, regional and international levels.” Furthermore, UNESCO supports efforts aimed at increasing women’s participation in peace-building processes and post-conflict situations through projects, for example, in the Great Lakes region, Iraq and Palestine.

There is a critical link between development and the political empowerment of women. The 2005 World Summit outcome document affirms that the “full and effective implementation of the goals and objectives of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly is an essential contribution to achieving the internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration”.

In this regard, UNESCO’s commitments include efforts to promote gender-responsive environmental management strategies and mechanisms and to enhance equal participation of women in all areas of UNESCO programming, with a strong emphasis on capacity-building and preparation to assume decision-making responsibilities. As the lead agency for the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), UNESCO is promoting women’s empowerment and gender equality as keys to creating a sustainable future.

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The role of education in addressing HIV and AIDS is development issue as well as an ethical imperative. The epidemic, which increasingly has a female face, provides a difficult challenge for EDUCAIDS, the UNESCO-led global initiative on education and HIV and AIDS in the context of EFA. Issues of gender equality and women’s empowerment are also central to ongoing debates about the relationship between culture and development. Special attention is being paid in our activities to strengthening the role of women in the renewal of transmission systems, especially in the areas of intangible cultural heritage and women’s role in arts and crafts production.

I am pleased to note that UNESCO is one of the first agencies in the UN system to respond to the call made by world leaders during the 2005 Millennium Summit, a call echoed by the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, to “mainstream a gender perspective in its policies and programmes as a tool for achieving gender equality”. UNESCO has developed and begun implementing a "Capacity Development and Training Programme for Gender Mainstreaming" which has been made mandatory for all directors and professional staff at UNESCO Headquarters and Field Offices.

UNESCO will celebrate this year’s International Women’s Day with an international Round Table on “Women in Politics” that will bring together women in decision-making at the highest levels of national politics. I am particularly pleased that Her Excellency President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia has graciously accepted to be the Guest of Honour and to deliver the keynote address at this event.

President Johnson-Sirleaf’s election and that of Michelle Bachelet as the next President of Chile are a welcome boost to women’s representation in political decision-making. Such events give renewed hope for future progress towards gender equality. Women ministers from around the world, representing different sectors and domains of UNESCO, will participate as panellists in the Round Table.

On this International Women’s Day in 2006, UNESCO reaffirms its commitment to efforts promoting women’s empowerment and female participation in decision-making at all levels. We invite all our partners to join in the ongoing endeavour to build a solid foundation on which full gender equality may rest.

In conclusion, on this special day let me extend a warm greeting to all our female colleagues on the staff of UNESCO, of National Commissions and of many other partners worldwide. I can assure you that UNESCO will strive to make further progress in gender mainstreaming and in promoting women’s empowerment as its contribution to the achievement of gender equality.

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