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Organización
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联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

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ECE Biennial Session

Roundtable “Empowering women for sustainable development in the UNECE region”

Seeing the world anew: empowering women; building sustainable futures.

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On behalf of our Director General, it is a pleasure to be here today to talk about an issue that cuts across all the domains of UNESCO's work. Indeed, UNESCO is delighted to be the UN lead agency for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. It will be of no surprise where I will place the emphasis in our search for solutions to today's topic – on education. However, perhaps the key point I want to make – based on this experience and UNESCO's holistic approach – is the need to articulate the synergies that exist between women's empowerment and sustainable development all the more clearly. *I should also begin with a brief disclaimer – although UNESCO does considerable work on gender and climate change, I have chosen to take a broader perspective for this brief presentation, given the presence of Irene Dankelman, a friend of UNESCO and experienced researcher on this topic.*

Not so long ago, I came to Geneva for a forum that UNESCO organized on Gender and Climate at the World Climate Conference at the end of 2009. At that time, we argued for a gender equality perspective to be integrated into the Global Framework for Climate

Services – a recognition of the diverse needs and contributions of women and men.

It seems fitting, in this same city, yet at a different time, not only to reiterate this point – but to make a far stronger case about how these issues must be articulated. It no longer seems enough to argue for the need to take gender into account when working on issues such as climate change (although I will continue to do this vocally!). Times are changing. Unprecedented improvements in the standard of living for much of humankind have had many consequences for the health of ecosystems around the globe.¹ As the well-being of the earth has been hit by this environmental crisis, the recent economic crises have struck the well-being of many of its inhabitants – undoubtedly in many ways that have yet to be fully understood.

As is emphasized in the framework for today’s roundtable, the terms of the debate – the phrase ‘sustainable development’ - call for recognition of the deeper issues; issues that demand to be raised to the surface if we are to successfully work towards sustainable development. It is not sustainable for the present scale of environmental pollution to continue. It is not sustainable for the present gender (and other) inequalities that mark our societies to continue. At UNESCO, we understand sustainable development to be environmentally sound, socially equitable, culturally sensitive and economically just.²

¹ This sentence borrowed from: Climate Change Education for Sustainable Development, UNESCO brochure.

² From UNESCO web portal on education for sustainable development

Of course all these ecological, economic, social and technological aspects were integrated into the initial vision of sustainable development as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,’ as defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development in the 1980s³. Yet, it seems timely to recall the interconnectedness of these issues in order to create appropriate solutions to the problem at hand: that is, empowering women for sustainable development.

The questions that arise are all too familiar from recent debates on gender equality in science and in the corporate world. As I see it there are two – perhaps three – complementary challenges at stake here.

First, in harmony with the aim of the Decade for Education for Sustainable Development: how can we ensure that *all* citizens – women and men - have the knowledge, attitudes and skills to allow them to make informed choices and responsible decisions?

Second, why are women under-represented at the highest decision-making levels? How can women be empowered to reach the highest echelons in all domains of life?

And third – our greatest challenge - to paraphrase Kofi Annan: how can we take an idea that seems abstract – (whether gender equality or sustainable development)– and turn it into reality for all the world’s

³ http://www.unesco.org/education/tlsf/TLSF/theme_a/mod02/uncom02t02.htm

people?⁴ How can we turn our vision of a more equitable and sustainable world into reality?

The broad answer was suggested by our Director General in a recent speech,⁵ in which she quoted Albert Einstein who said:

“You cannot solve a problem from the same consciousness that created it. You must learn to see the world anew.”

To UNESCO, ‘education is the way to see the world anew.’⁶

In order to achieve this, two key points must be taken into account. First, care must be taken with the content and quality of education; making learning relevant, preparing learners to enter the workforce as well as to become responsible citizens. Second, education can be read more widely to encompass learning in non-formal contexts and the messages that are disseminated in society at large via the media and within households. These points inform our work on sustainable development, as they do our work on gender equality.

Allow me to elaborate briefly on how our holistic approach to education can play a role in tackling the question at hand of how women can be empowered for sustainable development at all levels.

The first point – the necessary starting point - is to provide equal access to basic education. This is the good news; the foundations are

⁴ *“Our biggest challenge in this new century is to take an idea that seems abstract - sustainable development - and turn it into a reality for all the world’s people.” -Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, March 14, 2001, Bangladesh³*

⁵ **Address by Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO on the occasion of the Seminar on Climate Change and Education at the UN University “Responding to Climate Change Starts with Education”**

Tokyo, 26 November 2010

⁶ Ibid.

already there in terms of gender parity in access to education in the regions covered by the ECE. There is near total gender parity in primary and secondary education in North America and Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe and in Central Asia.⁷ In North America and Western Europe, girls could expect an additional year of schooling compared with boys.⁸ UNESCO found that women are increasingly likely to pursue higher education than men. 42 out of 48 countries in these regions show trends towards female *over*-representation.⁹

This good news leads me to the bad news: wide gender imbalances persist in terms of educational choices and employment patterns following education. These disparities are particularly striking when it comes to science and technology – domains which are of course key to tackling the current environmental crisis. It is worth briefly looking at these in more depth.

First, research has noted that there is horizontal gender segregation *within* the sciences. Except for the life sciences – often dominated by women in many places - science and technology remain statistically male disciplines. In the UK for example, women constitute 58% of medicine and dentistry courses, but only one in seven engineering students.

Second, although women outnumber men at Master's level, the situation reverses at doctoral level, with more men doing PhDs than women. In addition, globally, 29% of researchers are women, with

⁷ GMR 2011: 73. NB. ECE has 56 member states located in the EU, non-EU Western and Eastern Europe and CIS and North America.

⁸ GED 2010: 28

⁹ GED: 28

significant regional diversities. Whilst Central Asia has reached gender parity, only 32% of researchers in Europe are women.¹⁰ Male domination in these domains is exacerbated as we move higher up the ladder to those all important decision-making positions. A similar pattern can be observed in many places in the corporate and political spheres; to provide but one example, in France, women make up 41% of white collar workers, but only 17.2% of CEOs.¹¹ On the one hand this shows that women seem to struggle as they move higher up the educational ladder and into positions of authority.¹² On the other hand, these divergences show the socio-cultural underpinnings that underlie these inequalities and the need to be sensitive to local context when addressing them.

In short, career opportunities and preferences remain gendered – in particular in many domains that are of central concern to sustainable development, whether viewed through an environmental, economic or political lens. What role can education play in creating more equal and less gendered transition paths between school and career? In exploring this problem as it relates to adolescent girls in developing countries, UNESCO identified two factors¹³ that I believe are of relevance to the current debate.

First, the social norms that govern women's roles in society contribute to the persistence of a gendered division of labour; the gendered division of labour outside the household cannot be separated from labour arrangements at home. Let me provide you with one example.

¹⁰ Our Background paper, Women's and Girls' Access to and Participation in Science and Technology, UNESCO, 2010: 4

¹¹ EPWN (1) *from speaking points I wrote for Bokova for Deauville.*

¹² This section summarized from Women's and Girls' Access to and Participation in Science and Technology, UNESCO, 2010: 5-6.

¹³ GMR 2011: 79

Research in the UK comparing male and female team leaders, found that 96% of the men had children compared with 48% of the women.¹⁴

Second, discrimination persists in the labour market with occupations identified as the domain of either males or females.

Actions in school can help to breakdown these formal and informal barriers to equal career opportunities and the negative gender stereotypes that help perpetuate them. Schools must provide a supportive environment that expands horizons and challenges the stereotypes that restrict ambition.¹⁵ Teachers - and careers advisors - and their attitudes play a key role in this.

The UNESCO-L’Oreal partnership for Women in Science participates in breaking down negatives stereotypes by promoting female scientists and providing positive role models for the next generation. By providing grants, it also helps to increase the visibility and participation of women scientists at scientific conferences. Similarly – to provide but one example of best practice within your region – ‘the Center for Gender Equality of the University of Vienna developed a mentoring programme in order to advance the scientific careers of women. Groups of four women are mentored by one scientist to get strategic knowledge and build networks.’¹⁶ This action addresses the difficulties research has indicated that impede some women scientists from advancing in their careers. Concrete, targeted actions can make a difference in helping women advance in traditionally male domains.

¹⁴ The Lehman Brothers Centre for Women in Business.

¹⁵ GMR 2011: 80

¹⁶ UNESCO, Tomorrow Today: 149

The content of education programmes plays a crucial role in tackling these issues related to gender equality, as it does in supporting sustainable development. UNESCO has underlined the need to re-orientate existing education programmes to support sustainable development, revising curricula in science and mathematics education. This is why, for example, UNESCO created a *Starters Guidebook on Climate Change* aimed at educators and education planners – and which included a strong section on gender equality. The need for renewed, relevant education content has also been underlined as part of a programme to boost gender equality in science disciplines – as relevant science curricula motivate students to study these subjects and relate to improved articulations with the job market. Positive synergies begin to emerge in which gender equality and other elements of the sustainable development agenda become mutually reinforcing.

UNESCO seeks to raise public understanding and raise awareness in order to encourage lifestyle changes that support sustainable development.¹⁷ The role of the media in supporting shifts in gender stereotypes has also been stressed by UNESCO – especially in a context in which too few decision-makers remain women. UNESCO has underlined the importance of how science and technology issues are framed by journalists, in ways which may – or may not – be gendered in negative ways.

One example of our work to boost public awareness is a project entitled YouthXchange, developed in partnership with the United Nations Environmental Programme. YouthXchange seeks to raise

¹⁷ from: Address by Irina Bokova on the occasion of the Conference on Education for Sustainable Development in Support of Cultural and Biological Diversity, Oman, 24 January 2011.

awareness with young people and develop education resources for more sustainable consumer choices. In the context of this project, we have recently published a guidebook on climate change and life styles that aims to help young people consider the actions they might take towards more sustainable life styles. Alongside numerous topics ranging from sweatshops to recycling, the Internet forum includes information about gender equality and women's empowerment.¹⁸

Conclusion

With these brief examples, I have endeavoured to demonstrate that with creativity and concerted effort, it is possible to build positive synergies that empower women for sustainable development and enhance women's roles and ability to contribute to sustainable development. Empowering women IS sustainable development; I believe that we can build on past successes and articulate and exploit these synergies more clearly in the future.

In doing so, we can harness the transformative powers of education. UNESCO believes that education brings sustainability to development efforts.’’¹⁹ It is the way to shape new ways of seeing the world, new practices and behaviours. It is also the only way that science and technology can be fostered to serve all of humanity and that all citizens can engage in what are in essence ethical debates about the nature of the world we want to create for tomorrow.

¹⁸ See: http://www.youthxchange.net/main/b258_womenatparliament-b.asp

¹⁹ Citing Mrs Bokova at Davos, January 2011.

Sharing UNESCO's humanism and profound belief in human creativity and resilience, I am confident that – if we consolidate our efforts in this area - the future will be both sustainable and bright.

Relevant UNESCO Reference Documents

UNESCO, United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) Good Practices in the UNECE region, 2007:
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001533/153319e.pdf>

UNESCO manual on 'Gender and Climate Change'.

UNESCO, 'Tomorrow Today: Learning how to build a sustainable future,' 2010.

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UNESCO, Introduction to Sandwatch: An educational tool for sustainable development: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001427/142786e.pdf>