INTERNATIONAL ROUND TABLE ON

WOMEN IN POLITICS

International Women’s Day
8 March, 2006
UNESCO Headquarters, Paris
At the turn of the 21st century, women’s right to participate in politics have almost globally been recognized. Yet, despite their longstanding contribution to the political life of their countries, women continue to be significantly underrepresented at the ministerial level worldwide and rarely ascend to the highest positions of State leadership and decision-making. While some countries, such as Argentina, Rwanda, Spain and Sweden, have made great strides in promoting the equal political representation of women and men, others demonstrate that a covert discrimination against women persists.

The year 2006 marked a promising turning point for women in politics, as it ushered in the first democratically elected female President in Africa, H.E. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia, and the first female President in Chile, H.E. Michele Bachelet. To celebrate these auspicious events, as well as all the women who contribute to local, national, regional and global politics, UNESCO had the pleasure to host, on the occasion of International Women’s Day 2006, an International Roundtable on “Women in Politics.”

The Roundtable brought together five influential women in politics from different regions of the world. While they are from diverse political backgrounds, these women share a number of things in common: they hold positions that have traditionally been occupied by men, and through their work, they have contributed to the promotion of gender equality. They have demonstrated that, when given the opportunity for service and leadership, women will prove themselves to the appreciation of both women and men. This brochure comprises excerpts from the Roundtable which impart some of the challenges and triumphs experienced by these pioneering women in politics.

It is our hope that within an increasingly enabling environment, these distinguished women will open the door to the next generation of capable female leaders and allow women to make historic advances in all facets of the political arena. This would not only represent a critical leap for gender equality worldwide, but also a new hope for the wellbeing and safety of humankind.

Hans d’Orville
Assistant Director-General for Strategic Planning

Saniye Gülser Corat, Director
Division for Gender Equality
Bureau of Strategic Planning
Madam President, Mr President of the General Conference, Excellencies, Honourable Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to UNESCO today on the occasion of this year’s International Women’s Day.

It is my great honour and pleasure to welcome the President of Liberia, Her Excellency Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, to UNESCO House. Her presence is a particular honour indeed as this, I believe, is the first visit she has made to the headquarters of any UN body since she became President of her country. As a former Director of UNDP’s Africa Bureau, she is doubly welcome as a valued colleague from the UN family at large.

Madam President,

At a moment when, under your leadership, Liberia has set out on the path of democratic renewal and reinvigorated national development, you can be assured of our support. To succeed in your vital mission, you need the backing of the whole nation as well as the support of friends, partners and well-wishers from the entire international community. For its part, UNESCO stands ready and is committed to support you, together with other partner agencies of the UN system, in the undertaking you have embarked upon. In November 2004, I paid an official visit to Liberia in order to reaffirm our strong commitment to support and assist Liberia, especially in the area of education which is crucial for national reconstruction.

I am also very pleased to welcome four distinguished female ministers for our panel discussion: Madam Nada Haffadh, Minister of Health of Bahrain; Madam Blanca Ovelar de Duarte, Minister of Education and Culture of Paraguay; Madam Zobaida Jalal, Minister for Welfare and Special Education of Pakistan; and Madam Chinwe Obaji, Minister of Education of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and president of her country’s National Commission for UNESCO. Clearly, Bahrain, Paraguay, Pakistan and Nigeria are providing examples of how women can be fully involved in the political processes of their countries.

Finally, I extend a warm welcome to the other panelists and participants who have accepted my invitation to join us today for a discussion of the main theme of International Women’s Day, namely, ‘Women in Politics’.

Worldwide, 8 March is recognized as a day of reflection about the quest for gender equality – for both taking stock of the road traveled and for mobilizing actions to achieve the goals and targets necessary for women’s empowerment. Indeed, this day offers all who are engaged in the daily struggle for women’s advancement – women and men alike – a chance to gather new strength and inspiration by learning from and sharing experiences with women who have climbed the political ladder.
It is auspicious that the theme of today’s celebrations and discussions coincides with a momentous year for women in politics, heralded by the inauguration of the first elected female president in Africa – our keynote speaker today – and the election of the first female president in Chile, Michelle Bachelet. Their successful elections give hope for further development and concrete accomplishments towards more gender-balanced governments, parliaments and institutions – a fundamental precondition for genuine democracy.

The idea that women’s political leadership is linked with improved prospects for peace and socio-economic progress is based on a long-standing perception that, in practice, it is women who are the real architects and makers of peace. Liberia and Chile are examples of societies where women and men have put their collective trust in accomplished women leaders, confident that they will be able to heal the wounds left by war and dictatorship.

At this point, let me draw your attention to the photo exhibition, part of today’s celebratory events, on the first woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. This exhibition, organized in collaboration with the Permanent Delegation of Austria to UNESCO, provides an opportunity to mark the 100th anniversary of Bertha von Suttner’s receipt of that prestigious award. Bertha von Suttner had, of course, several worthy and distinguished female successors who also received this high international recognition, including Wangari Maathai and Shirin Ebadi, both of whom have strong links with UNESCO.

Globally, we have reasons to believe that the tide is beginning to turn in women’s favour. At the 2005 UN World Summit in New York last September, the world’s leaders made a strong commitment to foster women’s empowerment in all domains, especially to promote increased representation of women in government decision-making bodies, and to ensure their equal opportunity to participate fully in the political process. The task now is to translate these political commitments at the highest level into reality at all levels.

There is a critical link between development and the political empowerment of women, as underlined in the 2005 World Summit Outcome document. Through its programmes and activities, UNESCO is strongly committed to enhancing gender equality and to promoting the participation of women in political decision-making. Gender mainstreaming is a firm commitment. Furthermore, I have recently made gender mainstreaming training mandatory for all staff, including directors, at headquarters and field offices.

On this International Women’s Day in 2006, UNESCO reaffirms its full commitment to efforts promoting women’s empowerment and full participation in decision-making at all levels and invites all its partners to join in this endeavour to build a future where gender equality is universal.
I am most grateful for your kind invitation to participate in this program today. And I am pleased to bring you warm greetings from my people, most especially the women of Liberia, with whom you have decided to share the honor at this March 8 commemorative occasion marking International Women's Day.

It is indeed a pleasure and gives me a sense of pride to observe this day in the renowned city of Paris that has for centuries paid numerous tributes and honored many outstanding women who have left their imprint on the course of human events.

It is particularly gratifying for me to share some time, albeit brief, with so many notable intellectuals gathered in this room under the distinguished Chairmanship of the Director-General of UNESCO Mr. Koïchiro Matsuura.

In this connection, I must pay deserving tribute to UNESCO, an organization whose name and stature resonates intellectual depth, practical knowledge, and the embodiment of the educational, cultural and scientific heritage of all of the world's people.

I feel honored not only as a woman leader and representative of the people of Liberia, but also of women throughout Africa and the world, in their just and determined struggle to play a more prominent role in making decisions that affect their lives.

Permit me to observe that since the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, the People's Republic of China in 1995, the world has continued to witness considerable levels of progress as far as the role of women in decision making process and in particular the high level of women's political participation.

Since my election as President of Liberia less than three months ago, we are witnessing a most welcome development of the ascendancy of women through the democratic process across three continents – Europe, South America and Africa.

Across the Globe a number of great women have led the struggle for gender equity and equality and now their voices are being echoed higher and beyond the Great Wall of China since the historic Beijing Summit.

Yet, the challenge has always been – and will continue to be – how to identify a rallying point on the key issues associated with the struggle for gender equality and how to systematically enhance women's access to and participation in decision-making processes.

As we reflect on the Global theme of Women's participation in Decision-making, we can only hope that those elements of our achievements before and since our ascendancy to the pinnacle of state power in Liberia and any other attending success, will travel around every hamlet or village where women power thrives and toils to keep our various societies together.

Yes, indeed, Distinguished Representatives from diverse backgrounds and States, peoples from Civil Society organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations, it is important to draw our attention ever so often to the fact that in spite of the gains made so far, the place of women in our societies has still not reached an appreciable level as we had anticipated more than a decade ago.

Only a few days ago, it was reported in some of the major media outlets that the participation of...
women at the decision making level in politics represents only 16% and specific mention was made of the
great strides made by the heroic women of Rwanda leading the world with near 49% representation in parliament.

These gains notwithstanding, women, in many parts of the world, have remained virtually excluded from the mainstream of decision making, while at the same time their tireless efforts to gain access to resources and opportunities continue to be undermined by the reluctance of their societies to show a demonstrated commitment towards the goal of equality.

Several factors continue to buttress and solidify this reluctance. However, we remain eternally optimistic that the wind of change that has hit the west coast of Africa will swivel and blow at those archaic and backward structures of confinements. Structures that restrain the full and resourceful potential of womanhood.

It is unfortunate that the global principle which speaks of "the empowerment of women and autonomy of women and the improvement of women's social, economic and political status is essential for the achievement of both transparent and accountable government and administration in all areas of life...
remains a mirage in the minds of many. Obviously, this is the challenge that we must be prepared to face if our development goals are to be achieved in a timely manner.

But it would certainly be unrealistic to ignore the fact that some positive efforts have been made in many parts of the world, especially in terms of political participation in some developing countries, as women are occupying and rising to top-level economic and political management portfolios, defying the status quo and at times even presenting clear and formidable leadership skills. The gender gap remains a huge one, continentally and globally.

Let me stress, however, that the world needs to be reminded again and again that where women have succeeded, in achieving some level of progress in terms of political participation, that success has almost always been overwhelmed by enormous challenges or issues that need to be tackled more vigorously. This involves redeploying energies and resources towards pursuing not only equity but also a form of participation in which women in decision-making can endeavor to bring quality in order to generate the desired change.

Indeed, since 1995, the struggle to enhance women's access to decision-making bodies has intensified remarkably. The Beijing Summit alerted the world to the stark reality that without creating the enabling environment that promotes gender equality and gender justice, the majority of the world's rapidly growing population will continue to remain in abject poverty, while at the same time their vulnerability to killer diseases such as HIV/AIDS, TB, malaria and other infectious diseases will no doubt increase.

After decades of campaign against social inequalities, the world must now wake up to the clarion call of women for a level playing field in which both men and women can fully utilize their vast potentials to engender social, economic, political and cultural advancement. In this respect, the key issues associated with women's participation in leadership will have to be addressed more aggressively as we move further into the 21st Century.

It is crucial for us to underscore once more that qualitative participation in leadership is the objective of promoting gender justice. Therefore for us in Africa's Oldest Republic, the journey has begun in earnest.

We have committed ourselves to unleashing an all-out campaign against all forms of social injustices in our Nation. The main goal of this campaign is to create an environment that promotes fair play, engenders socio-economic growth and advancement and facilitates justice and equality for all, irrespective of tribal, gender and political differences.

Women in decision-making must at all times seek a clear objective. Such objective will of course require that women leaders should be committed to providing qualitative leadership, which, in most instances, has always been lacking. In other words, women who make it to top leadership positions in their countries, as in our case in Liberia, must understand that any reluctance and/or refusal to deal decisively with certain social ills, for example, the menace of corruption, will undermine their capacity to lead.

For any environment that has been dominated by bad governance practices over many decades, the
only best leadership alternative is a strong determination and will to break completely with the past.

Now the time has come for women leaders to realize that the goal of their long years of toil and struggle for equality has never been to perpetuate societal ills, but to defeat or eradicate them so that social, economic, political and cultural advancement can be attained.

As we strive for equitable distribution and access to resources and decision making at all levels, we need to again be reminded that ours must always be to seek to overturn the structural and attitudinal barriers that need to be addressed through positive measures. Such measures should encompass a visible policy of mainstreaming the gender perspective in all policies and programs so that before decisions are made or taken, an analysis is made of their effect on men and women, girls and boys.

Today the world could have become more gender-balanced if leaders had taken practical steps towards actualizing the Twelve Critical Areas outlined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action. As a reminder to us all since Beijing '95 the critical areas of concern addressed by the Platform for Action are:

1. The persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women  
2. Inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to education and training  
3. Inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to health care and related services  
4. Violence against women  
5. The effects of armed or other kinds of conflict on women, including those living under foreign occupation  
6. Inequality in economic structures and policies in all forms of productive activities and in access to resources  
7. Inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision making at all levels  
8. Insufficient mechanisms at all levels to promote the advancement of women  
9. Lack of respect for and inadequate promotion and protection of the human rights of women  
10. Stereotyping of women and inequality in women's access to and participation of all communication systems especially in the media  
11. Gender inequalities in the management of natural resources and in the safeguarding of the environment  
12. Persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child.

There is a need for governments and peoples across the globe to make concerted efforts to address these critical issues in conjunction with the eight Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000. Their full realization will lead to the attainment of development for all peoples in a more peaceful and secured environment. Moreover, the attainment of the basic minimum of these Global milestones in a decade would be an important step toward gender equality, achieving equity and justice in the world.

If we are to correct the ills in many developing societies, women with the moral rectitude should aspire to positions of power and decision making in their communities. Proven tested, tried and committed leadership at the local government levels can lead to the lead to their assumption of even greater decision making responsibilities.

To be sure, we are still challenged to eradicate poverty, HIV/AIDS, illiteracy, human rights violation such as violence against women, human trafficking, harmful traditional practices against women, limited access to resources and opportunities, corruption, lawlessness and other social ills. While these challenges remain formidable they are not insurmountable.

I believe that addressing them in a timely and well-focused manner will confirm women's leadership potential and help elevate societies from the culture of bad governance that is prevalent in most developing countries. Leaders who are committed and have the courage of their conviction, particularly women leaders, will tackle and address the critical issues affecting women and children or one half of humanity.

Finally let me re-emphasize here that women's success in decision making positions will largely depend on their character, competency, the courage of their conviction and a commitment to team work. In the case of the national government, a team comprising the private sector, civil society and an open, accountable and transparent governance structure including our international partners will set the threshold for a more wholesome functional participation of all the stakeholders.

Women in decision making positions will and can succeed if they set as well as maintain the
standards of excellence which they ascribe to personally. They must also demonstrate clear commitment and respect for international norms and treaties which have evolved over the years and brought the concept and practice of equity and equality to the fore. In this regard women are under more societal pressure, scrutiny as well as obligation to protect and promote the human rights of women and girl children as an integral part of the universal human rights.

We know our people are looking to us for success and we cannot and must not fail. We embrace the goodwill at the international level as a sign that indeed the wind of change is beginning to blow across the continent and inspire women to assume decision making positions in order to pursue the noble objectives they set for not only themselves but for their people.

Women leaders will be expected to demonstrate at all times a willingness to break with the past, a commitment to serve and a determination to never relent in pursuing truth, justice, good governance and the rule of law.

Women have demonstrated considerable leadership at the family level, in the community and informal organizations, in high levels of international organizations, and are now boldly stepping up the highest mantle of state authority in public life and we are convinced that with good guidance, commitment, dedication to change, with a vision that carries forward equality and social equity, women, through their leadership role, will help to make the world a safer, peaceful, more progressive place for themselves and their children.

We know that in Liberia, we take on the responsibility of setting the pace, of being able to take the winds of change and turn it into a reality for the advancement of women. For sensitivity towards the needs of society, for being able to respond to those needs and to bring effective leadership, to bring prosperity, to bring integrity, to bring character, to bring to all of our people those wishes which they have dreamed of in all those years will become possible by promoting women to the highest level of state power. We promise to this group that our commitment will remain ever alive and that Liberia will become, once again, a beacon, one that sets the pace, for women’s leadership that can make a difference in the quality of the lives of people, not only in Liberia and Africa, but we dare say, across the world.
Nada Abbas Haffadh, Minister of Health of Bahrain

Nada Abbas Haffadh is Bahrain’s first female cabinet minister. Her previous positions include Health Coordinator and clinical lecturer at the Arabian Gulf University. She also served as a member of the Shura Council and worked in public service positions, including the Supreme Council for Women. With a specialization in family medicine, she is spearheading change through a series of progressive policy initiatives.

“I would like to give you an example of someone from a political background who told me ‘you are the right person for this job.’ I think that was probably one of the nicest things I heard from anybody. He didn’t say ‘good, we have a woman minister’, he said ‘we have the right person for the right job,’ and I had done everything I could to make sure that I deserved that.

“I decided not to tie this post in with being a woman. I decided to promote the idea that this ministry, this post, has nothing to do with the gender of the person who is working in it. I do not want to see some type of solemn link between the fact that I am a woman and that I am occupying this post. However, that doesn’t mean that when we are nominated to these positions as women, we aren’t under the microscope. When men become ministers, everybody feels it is normal, but when women become ministers, they have to prove themselves….and doubly so.”

“In spite of the improvements we’ve seen and the steps we’ve taken over these last few decades in our country …. there are still problems, especially in the family code, which regulates the relations of women within that family, her rights as a mother, her rights to divorce and so on. It’s very important to emphasize this aspect before we talk about women’s role in politics.”

“Women can come to the highest level of politics only with the support of the entire society; of men and women as well as from male and female politicians. We have to promote confidence in women at all levels.”

Chinwe Obaji, Minister of Education

Chinwe Obaji is Minister of Education of Nigeria. She previously worked in academia as Chief Lecturer, Head of Department, Director, and Member of the Governing Council of various Colleges. Since her swearing in as Minister, Ms. Obaji has championed the execution of President Olusegun Obasanjo’s reforms in the education sector and has spearheaded important girls’ education projects.

“Historical evidence abounds showing the place of great Nigerian women and their very notable contributions to the political history of their societies. These distinguished women whose achievements are recorded both in the oral and written history of Nigeria are dotted across the different parts of our country and were involved in the decision-making processes of their societies, offering unquestionable leadership both in peace and war and ensuring, through their deeds, respect and safety of their people.”

“Unfortunately, the post-colonial arrangement in most of our countries - this is definitely true of mine - were overwhelmingly men-dominated, to the detriment of the just exploitation of the tremendous storehouse of leadership and devoted services that reside in more than 50 per cent of society, contributed by women.”
“I come from a very traditional conservative tribal society and my home town is one of the most remote within Pakistan.... Many cultural, traditional values, perceptions of what Islam says about women’s empowerment, the duty of each Muslim to provide equal opportunities for education - whether it happens to be for a male or a female - had been misunderstood culturally.’

“Every morning I would go to the office and my driver would tell me ‘Madam, with your humble approach and with your softness, I don’t think you will be able to get this male dominated ministry so you better start becoming a bit aggressive and a bit harsh.’ I think I proved him wrong because I continued - I couldn’t change my nature - and I put in the first education sector reforms and made education one of the priorities for this country. Today, I have a plate in my office that says ‘Please do not mistake kindness for weakness.’”

“It requires us women ministers double the effort compared to what men ministers do naturally to prove that we are equal.”

“I have come a long way, and have gone through all the cycles of empowerment, whether social, spiritual, political, or economic empowerment. My struggle has been from the furthest part of the country for a woman but deeply humanistic, as women’s empowerment must be supported by enlightenment so that we are able to move forward.”

“Our efforts are tall, but humble at the same time. A journey has begun and we will reach at the end of the tunnel a new base line of rights, duties and obligations on equal and human terms fully backed by the law, religion, and the constitution of the country.”

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Zobaida Jalal, Minister of Welfare and Special Education of Pakistan

Zobaida Jalal was the first Baloch woman to be directly elected to the National Assembly. Prior to her appointment as Minister for Social Welfare and Special Education, she served as Minister of Social Welfare and Women’s Affairs, Minister of Education, Science and Technology, and Minister of Education. She has actively promoted girls’ education in the province of Balochistan, and children’s rights.

“In spite of our disadvantaged place in the political order, women in Nigeria never gave up.... They constituted themselves into a powerful repository of knowledge, know-how and a qualified corps of dedicated nationals, ready and waiting for the right leadership to be galvanized into an army of progress in the service of the nation.”

“The light at the end of the tunnel is the hope that, when the scale is eventually balanced, and the more than 50 per cent of human beings made up of women from all over the world occupy their rightful places in the ordering of the world and for the greater glory and success of humanity itself, Nigerian women will not be left out.”

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“This is a very important day for women worldwide. We need to ask ourselves the following questions: Why have the United Nations set as one of the Millennium Development Goals to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women? Why is this such an important goal? A lot of countries are making huge efforts to reach the Millennium Development Goals. And this particular target is very relevant and will certainly help to improve matters. It will help for example to better distribute resources among human beings, it will help to bring about more equity and in particular it will help to mitigate human suffering.”

“In Paraguay we have a veiled sexism because although women do participate in society and in politics… there are still cultural prejudices that raise invisible barriers and make it difficult for women to play a role in decision-making, in particular for top level jobs.”

“The women of my country are still not satisfied despite [recent] achievements because, for example, the electoral law calls for a minimum of 20 per cent for each gender group standing for elections, but it’s always the women who are part of the 20 per cent and even that is sometimes difficult to reach. Why isn’t it ever the men who are 20 per cent on those electoral polls? We still have a long way to go.”

“On International Women’s Day I would like to pay tribute to all the anonymous women in my country and all of our countries, all of those women who are not members of panels, who were never invited by UNESCO or any other organizations, but who on a daily basis are those who struggle to help their families, help their communities, and pay often a great sacrifice.”

“Let me quote from a statement that was published today from the Secretary General of the United Nations. He said that the world is starting to acknowledge that there is no policy more effective in promoting development, education, health and peace than the empowerment of women and girls.”

“Those of us who have been involved in women’s rights movements, as activists, as advocates, as practitioners know for certain that it is only thanks to women who are not afraid to speak up, who are not afraid to put up resistance, that change happens, and it is those women who have changed and who will continue to change the situation of women for the better; and it is those women who will continue to make the world a more humane place.”