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**Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura,
Director-General of UNESCO
on the occasion
of International Women's Day**

8 March 2009

Each year, International Women's Day (IWD) provides an occasion for taking stock of progress and reflecting on the challenges that remain in the pursuit of gender equality. IWD 2009 is my tenth and last as Director-General of UNESCO and it is a matter of regret that although gender equality was enshrined in the United Nations Charter in 1945, and targeted as specific Millennium Development Goal (MDG 3) in 2000, it still remains an aspiration rather than the reality in too many areas of public and private life.

It is therefore apt that as the world marks IWD 2009, the 53rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) will be considering "The equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including care-giving in the context of HIV/AIDS". It will also review progress on the implementation of the agreed conclusions of its 50th session on "Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels". There is a clear link between the two themes and collective efforts to identify enduring solutions to the world's most challenging social, economic and political problems. Quite simply, it will be impossible to construct – let alone implement - appropriate responses without the full involvement of women as well as men.

We do not need to scratch too far beneath the surface of the CSW themes to realize that for every little gain, serious challenges remain. Regarding the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men including care-giving in the context of HIV and AIDS, significant commitments have been made by Governments at the international level, starting with the International Conference on Population and Development (1994), the Fourth World Conference on Women

(1995), the World Summit for Social Development (1995) and continuing with the twenty-third special session of the United Nations General Assembly (2000), and the Beijing +10 Review in 2005. Yet, women and girls continue to assume a disproportionate share of responsibilities in the household and in care giving, and the public sphere and workplace continue to be based on male models of work and public involvement. This limits women's access to economic, professional and decision-making opportunities.

We need to make more systematic and concerted efforts to explore the underlying causes of unequal sharing of responsibilities between women and men in the public and private spheres. Only then will we be able to identify and redress the consequences of such inequalities for the labour market, governance and decision-making, and to develop more effective policy responses.

A close look at the participation of women in decision-making processes in different areas reveals a similar picture. For example, while the latest figures from the Inter-Parliamentary Union reveal some progress in the area of women's representation in political decision-making, with women accounting for 18.4 per cent of parliamentarians around the world in 2008, significant regional differences indicate that there is little room for complacency. Furthermore, women remain a minority in the highest positions. For example, at the start of 2008, they accounted for only 4.7 per cent of Heads of State; and only 4.2 per cent of Heads of Government. At the Ministerial level, women held only 16.1 per cent of ministerial portfolios around the world.

The challenge is more significant when we look at women's participation in key areas of economic decision-making, an area that has serious implications for the distribution of assets. For example, the number of women Ministers of Finance is negligible while at the international level, only 12 Chief Executive Officers of Fortune 500 companies are women.

We can no longer be diffident or claim lack of knowledge. We can no longer pretend that discrimination against women and girls does not affect us or somebody we know. We see it on television, we read about it in the media, and millions of women experience it in their daily lives. With knowledge comes responsibility.

That is why gender equality has been designated as one of UNESCO's two global priorities for 2008-2013. We are implementing this commitment through the Priority Gender Equality Action Plan, a six-year plan with concrete actions, expected results and budget allocations. Globally, we are paying particular attention to two of the MDGs which address the situation of women and girls, namely, MDG 2 (achieve universal primary education) and MDG 3 (promote gender equality and empower women). Internally, UNESCO is committed to achieving gender parity in decision making levels within the Secretariat by 2015.

UNESCO is convinced that sustainable development, human rights and peace can only be realized if women and men enjoy expanded and equal opportunities, choices and the ability to live in freedom and dignity. Gender equality will exist when both women and men are able to share equally in the distribution of power and knowledge, have equal opportunities, rights and obligations in terms of work or income generation, are given equal access to quality education, capacity building opportunities throughout life and in all domains, and the possibility to develop to their full potential.

On International Women's Day 2009, I call on all UNESCO's partners to intensify their efforts and commitment to achieving gender equality in education, the sciences, culture and communication and information and to contributing to the sustainable future of our world.



Koïchiro Matsuura