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Organización  
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

**Address by Irina Bokova,**

**Director-General of UNESCO**

**on the occasion of Launch of the Joint Programme in Nepal  
Empowering Adolescent Girls and Young Women through Education**

**Kathmandu, 18 April 2016**

Honourable Mr Giriraj Mani Pokharel, Minister for Education of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal,

Mr Bishwa Prakash Pandit, Secretary, Minister for Education of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal,

Ms Giulia Vallese, United Nations Population Fund Representative to Nepal,

Mr Ziad Sheikh, UN Women Representative to Nepal,

Mr Hyung Kyoo Kim, KOICA,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to be here today, to launch the *Joint Programme in Nepal for the Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women through Education*.

The fruit of partnership between UNESCO, UN Women and the United Nations Population Fund, the Joint Programme was launched globally in March last year.

This was shortly before the earthquakes that devastated this country.

I wish to take this opportunity once again to express in person my deepest condolences to the Government and people of Nepal, to all who lost family and friends.

I pledge once again UNESCO's absolute commitment to support the society of Nepal in recovering, in building back better.

Cultural heritage is an important part of this, and we are looking at how to mobilize more expertise and parties to give back to the Nepalese people the beautiful temples and monuments that are deeply linked to the spirituality of this country.

These natural disasters left a terrible wake across the country.

But they cannot stop the people of Nepal.

They will not stop the progress this country has led since 2000, to reach the Millennium Development Goals, to alleviate poverty, to empower every citizen with learning and literacy.

I have just visited a Community Learning Centre supported by UNESCO where I interacted with dozens of women who have passed through literacy courses. When I asked one woman why she hadn't been able to attend school, she explained that she came from a family of 7 siblings, and had a disability affected her feet. She now works in a monastery and said that literacy allows her to keep accounting records and be a guide for visitors. I met her daughter who told me that she wanted to become a doctor, to help poor people when they fall ill.

So all this is to say that I am more than convinced that education is one of the most important rights to fulfil if we want to respect the dignity of every man and woman.

The earthquakes destroyed schools.

Children were left without textbooks, school materials.

Teachers were left without classrooms, libraries.

All were affected by the trauma.

But this will not stop the people of Nepal from looking to the future together, united in solidarity, tolerance and peace.

The new Constitution of Nepal enshrined the right of every citizen to free compulsory and basic education.

I met with the President today, who pledged her full political support to the implementation of this Constitution with its important articles women's rights and on education and literacy.

I believe this is the message we send today.

It is a message of values – a message of resolution, of human rights and dignity.

It is the message that no one will be left behind as this country and society rebuild...

...especially girls and women.

Across the world, including in Nepal, there has been great progress since 2000 in getting girls to school.

But the fact remains – being born a girl, far too often, still means a life of discrimination.

Girls and young women face steep barriers to entering education, from poverty, from discrimination and gender-based violence.

They are forced out of school, married young, held back by early pregnancies.

The situation is alarming and simply unacceptable.

There are 32 million girls out of primary school today — the number of excluded adolescent girls is higher.

Of 781 million illiterate adults, two thirds are women — this proportion has not changed since 2000 albeit the efforts of many countries.

We are seeing discrimination compound poverty compound marginalisation.

This is about human rights and dignity.

This is about justice, healthier societies, more inclusive and sustainable development for all.

This is the spirit of the new *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Agenda* – embodied in Sustainable Development Goal 4, to “*ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning*”. Leading up to this, we had our wonderful World Education Forum in Incheon, Republic of Korea. Our KOICA partners were actively involved in different debates, including on girls and literacy for women that are prerequisites for achieving more justice in the world.

The same inspiration underpins the Joint Programme we launch in Nepal today – and that was signed with the Executive Directors of UN Women and UNFPA late last year –, to chart a new course for girls’ and women’s education. I know that many partners in the UN are committed to this agenda.

Charting a new course means drawing the right lessons.

Focusing on access to school is essential – but it is not enough.

Focusing on formal schooling is vital, but insufficient.

To tackle the obstacles facing adolescent girls and young women, we need to widen the lens and bring new partners on board.

We need to understand the factors holding girls back and leading them to drop out, in families, in societies, from discrimination, violence, poverty, from intersecting economic, socio-cultural, health and political constraints.

We need to promote education in a holistic manner, throughout life, to ensure girls and young women make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health, to support them in successful transitions to adulthood and the labour market, to participate fully in society.

This means we need to widen the lens, to work beyond education ministries, with ministries for health, labour, technology, family, finance, hand-in-hand with civil society and relevant non-governmental actors.

This is how we will get girls to school and ensure they stay the course, all the way from primary through secondary,

We need to act across the board, with the Government, drawing on the expertise of three United Nations agencies, to tackle obstacles, to strengthen the nexus between education, gender equality and empowerment.

Empowering girls and young women is a way to empower all society and families.

This is a way to nurture the creativity and dynamism all countries need today.

This is a way to strengthen health, to sharpen productivity, to build more just and inclusive societies.

Empowering girls and young women *now* means empowering positive change *tomorrow*.

This is the conviction that brings us together today.

It is the conviction girls and young women are essential for Nepal, on the path to rebuilding.

The number of out-of-school children in Nepal has fallen considerably over the past decades, and the rate of literacy has improved.

This shows the commitment and ownership guiding Government and society, to empower all citizens of Nepal.

Ownership and political leadership are the prerequisite for UN parties to support the Government, and I know that you have incorporated the SDGs in your policies and programmes.

This same commitment to accompany your Government inspires the Joint Programme we launch today, to help adolescent girls and young women get to school, stay the course, learn skills to live in dignity and contribute fully.

I thank the Government of Nepal for this leadership.

I thank UN Women and the United Nations Population Fund for their partnership.

With support from the Malala Fund and Hainan, we have already succeeded in planting the first seeds of this Joint Programme, through a project to promote equitable education, literacy and lifelong learning.

I am especially grateful to the Republic of Korea, through the *Korean International Cooperation Agency*, a very solid partner, for its generous support, to allow the implementation of this programme over the next five years, starting in Nepal.

Our project is expected to benefit more than 500,000 adolescents over the next five years, with a focus on comprehensive sexuality education and safe learning environments, aligning with the Republic of Korea's *Better Life for Girls* initiative, announced by the President last year. I remember her powerful words when she visited UNESCO last December and gave an important speech to all our Member States. This is how we started the programme we are launching in Nepal today.

All this is guided by solidarity, by the conviction we stand together as one humanity, beginning with those most in need.

In this spirit, I wish to end with words from the Great Poet, Laxmi Prasad Devkota:

*Where are your friends? Who go with you? Which land is your home? What place do you seek, Traveller? With what news do you roam?*

*My friend is decent diligence. Courage comes with me.  
The whole world is my home. To the heartland, I roam with hues of Humanity.*

Thank you. Dhanyabad.