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Message from Ms Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO, on the occasion of International Women's Day, 8 March 2013

A promise is a promise: Time for action to end violence against women.

On International Women's Day, we celebrate the strides that have been made to advance women's rights and the individual heroes, girls and women, who are making history in societies across the world.

This is also a day to cast an objective eye on where we stand and reflect on the obstacles that remain. Violence against women is one of the most deadly and widespread violations of women's rights across the world. Violence takes many shapes -- physical, sexual, psychological and economic -- but the result remains the same devastating violation of fundamental rights and human dignity. There are concerted efforts at all levels to stop this violence, but progress is haltingly slow.

The brutal attack on 9 October 2012 against Malala Yousafzai, a fourteen year old girl, shot for claiming the right of girls to an education, reminds us of the challenges we must overcome. This is why UNESCO is working with Governments across the world to support the right of girls and women to quality education under conditions of safety. This is essential not only for social justice but also for sustainable development.

On 20 December 2012, the United Nations General Assembly passed a landmark resolution to intensify global efforts to eliminate female genital mutilation/cutting. An estimated 100-140 million girls and women across the world have suffered from this practice, with three million girls at risk each year in Africa alone. These practices affect girls and women for life, holding back their development, undermining their confidence, with wide repercussions across societies. The UN resolution is a historic step, which we must all help to move forward.

UNESCO is working across the board to end violence against women. Laws alone are not enough. We must educate to shape new norms and behaviors. We must support women in becoming leaders in all fields of human endeavor, starting from UNESCO's priorities of education, the sciences, culture, communication and information, including the media. To empower women and ensure equality, we must challenge every form of violence every time it occurs. This is UNESCO's promise on International Women's Day.

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