MALALA: SYMBOLIZING THE RIGHT OF GIRLS TO EDUCATION

“Stand up for Malala -- Stand up for girls’ right to education!” is the rallying cry of an advocacy event, taking place at UNESCO’s Paris Headquarters on 10 December, the United Nations Human Rights Day. Organized by UNESCO and the Government of Pakistan, the event will accelerate political action to ensure every girl’s right to go to school, and to advance girls’ education as an urgent priority for achieving Education For All.

The event pays tribute to Malala Yousafazi, an astonishingly brave 15 year old girl who survived an assassination attempt for her determined efforts to defend girls’ education in Pakistan, after the Taliban outlawed schools for girls in her native Swat Valley. The human rights to education and gender equality were both violated by this action.

“Whenever and wherever a young girl is forbidden from going to school, it’s an attack against all girls, against the right to learn, the right to live life to the full; and it is unacceptable,” declared UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova last month in an official manifestation of support for Malala. Indeed, there is no justification – be it cultural, economic or social – for denying girls and women an education. Humanity stands as a single community when united around human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Malala’s struggle highlights a devastating reality: Girls make up the majority of the world’s 61 million out-of-school children. They are less likely than boys to enter primary school. Harmful practices such as early marriage, gender-based violence, discriminatory laws, prevent them from enrolling in or completing school. Educational disparities start at the youngest ages and
continue into adulthood. Women represent two thirds of the world’s 775 million illiterates. Despite making breakthroughs in higher education, women still account for just 29 per cent of researchers.

There can be no equitable and just society without achieving gender equality, beginning with education. UNESCO is committed to the full enrolment of girls and ensuring they stay in school, from primary through secondary and on into higher education. Education accelerates political, economic and social transformation, giving girls the tools to shape the world according to their aspirations. It has a positive impact on child and maternal health, fertility rates, and poverty reduction. It is a life multiplier. For example, women with post-primary education are 5 times more likely than illiterate women to be knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS prevention.

In her famous blog about life under Taliban rule, Malala reacts to the destruction of schools, and especially girls’ schools: “Five more schools have been destroyed, one of them was near my house. I am quite surprised, because these schools were closed so why did they also need to be destroyed?” As UNESCO’s 2011 Global Monitoring Report reveals, children and schools today are on the front line of armed conflicts, with classrooms, teachers and pupils seen as legitimate targets. The consequence, as one UN report puts it, is “a growing fear among children to attend school, among teachers to give classes, and among parents to send their children to school”. Saluting Malala’s courage, Ms Bokova offered this sobering reminder of the global situation: “This April, in Afghanistan, more than 100 high school students from the Takhar province were poisoned by fanatics hostile to girls’ education. In Mali, young girls are married by force, recruited by militia, and prevented from going to school and leading a dignified life. Malala is the symbol of all of these young girls.”

How many other girls see their access to education impeded by violence, either threatened or actual? Why are girls and women the principal victims of such threats? Rather than lying on the frontline of conflict, education must be at the forefront of building peace.

UNESCO reacted to news of Malala’s shooting, which also left two other girls injured, in an official condemnation. “Guns cannot be allowed to wipe out the right to education or the right to freedom of
expression... It is the responsibility of each and every one of us to stand up against this,” said the Director General. To close the 190th session of UNESCO’s Executive Board, all 58 Member States took up this call, standing in a moment of silence and holding photographs of Malala.

The launch of the 2012 Education For All Global Monitoring Report in Islamabad was dedicated to Malala, to emphasize that girls' education is a must if development targets in Pakistan are to be achieved.

“My purpose is to serve humanity,” Malala once said in an interview, with a maturity well beyond her years. Like so many young people today, Malala is helping to change the world. Malala’s passionate advocacy shows the power of aspirations for human rights to move history. UNESCO’s event on 10 December draws strength from her example. There are no immovable barriers to gender equality and education for all. Her dream is ours. We are all Malala.