



*Princess Firqal of Jordan*

## **Promoting education for girls and women**

In a world of problems, ethnic wars, poverty, and natural catastrophes, in effect what Shakespeare named 'a sea of troubles', UNESCO can be compared to a lighthouse. It unites all that is best in the human condition: education, culture, science and the promotion of tolerance, peace and democracy.

Following the path of my mother who was head of the Red Cross in Jordan, I started my voluntary work in the Middle East by working with local charitable organizations in rural and urban areas in Jordan, and became aware of UNESCO's programmes in that area. Because of my experience with non-governmental organizations I was asked to become a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador in 1992 to help promote programmes for the education of girls and women. I did this through fund-raising and through participation in conferences with local and regional decision makers. I was doubly involved in education, because during this same period I was completing the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree at Columbia University – so I was personally aware of the problems and challenges facing professors and educational institutions because I myself was still a graduate student.

Over the years I have supported various UNESCO programmes and, in some cases, did fund raising for extra-budgetary projects. Each time I have been impressed by the commitment, depth of knowledge and imagination and skills of the UNESCO experts and programme directors I met. It has always amazed me

how some of the experts and dedicated professionals have reached such a high level of competence despite the adversity, constraints and hardship they have had to overcome in their home countries to achieve an education. Moreover, people at UNESCO are employed based on meritocracy alone, regardless of sex, language or religion. The fact that such a varied group of people works together in the organization is an affirmation of one of the fundamental aspects of the Charter of the United Nations. I also draw inspiration from contact with my fellow Goodwill Ambassadors, who come from various cultural and national backgrounds.

One of the experiences that left a mark on me was a visit last summer to UNESCO World Heritage sites in Albania. This very poor country had been subjected, for a great many years, to oppression and conflict; the population has had a very limited and difficult access to education. Yet the people of Albania take great pride in their newly opened country, in their World Heritage sites, and in their folklore and culture. Without any bitterness they have become ardent defenders of peace, which will lead, eventually, to prosperity. The foundations they are building to assure their future can only be achieved through education and hard work. Their very real pride in their cultural heritage is a positive factor for the development of their country, and it is my intention to do anything I can to help these proud people.

The latest UNESCO goal with which I have been involved is 'Education for All'. This is a vast project, which is connected to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The projects are idealistic and practical at the same time. What has impressed me and what I wish to explain to people outside UNESCO is that 'Education for All' is a cooperative effort between the concerned countries, governments, educators and UNESCO. The emphasis on the education of women is based on the proven statistic that educating women will do more to improve a country's GNP than any other developmental plan, whether it is a system of highways or an electricity plant. So education is a very powerful tool indeed for fighting poverty.

UNESCO plays an important role in fulfilling the needs of many societies, both in the oriental and occidental world. It promotes strong international values. That is the reason why I believe that it is a privilege for young men and women who are beginning their career at UNESCO to benefit from the scope of experiences of this international body.

My involvement with UNESCO has been an eye-opener and taught me many valuable lessons. As my field of work for UNESCO is education for girls and women, the goal of eradicating illiteracy across the globe is a top priority and has become one of my main personal objectives.