



Calling her “a woman of heart and action” and a friend of UNESCO with a proven record of work defending the rights of under-privileged children, UNESCO Director General Koichiro Matsuura on 23 March appointed Italian-born Cristina Owen-Jones Goodwill Ambassador for the fight against HIV/AIDS. A familiar face around UNESCO in recent years because of her advocacy of children’s rights, Ms Owen-Jones is also well known in the world of Parisian *haute monde* as the wife of Lindsay Owen-Jones, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of the cosmetics company *L’Oréal*.

Since 2002 Cristina has worked with UNESCO’s Programme for the Education of Children in Need. She has been particularly active in supporting the Don Bosco centers for street children in Argentina, which helps deprived children recover from the effects of malnutrition, illnesses and acts of violence. Her forceful advocacy has brought an outpouring of sympathy and support for the Don Bosco centers.

As Goodwill Ambassador, Cristina plans to concentrate mainly on UNESCO projects for HIV/AIDS prevention education. To prepare for this work she travelled recently to South Africa, Zambia and Mozambique, visiting centers where the emphasis is edu-



UNESCO Director General Koichiro Matsuura with Cristina Owen-Jones, the Agency’s newest Goodwill Ambassador.

cation as a preventive measure in fighting HIV/AIDS. She also met with a number of health and education ministers on her trip, and the experience has left her with a commitment to mobilize resources in support of AIDS education. The hardship and social disruption caused by AIDS in Africa, especially the plight of hundreds of thousands of women who have been widowed, and the even larger number of children who have been orphaned, have left a deep impression. This comes across to an interviewer as a steely determination to make a difference.

Cristina is well aware that making a difference will not be easy, that the effort will have to be over the long term and require substantial resources and training. In 2003 alone some 4.2 million adults and 700,000 children under the age of 15 were newly infected with HIV/AIDS. Out of these, 2.5 million adults and 500,000 children died. The total number of individuals living with HIV/AIDS is estimated to be 40 million worldwide. As she told an interviewer recently, “from Africa to Europe, North America and Asia, HIV/AIDS has created an emergency. It means not only a

human drama, but also a disaster for economic development of many countries. Aids is not only a disease but it is a social, political and cultural problem.”

Education is critically important to prevent the spread of AIDS: the more people are aware of the dangers, the better they can adjust behavior patterns that expose them to risk. But resources for education are scarce in many countries, especially the worst affected. In Zambia and Mozambique, for instance, the governments do not have money for preventive education. Both countries

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## Shirin Ebadi Nobel Laureate Walks Fine Line

In late February 2004, Shirin Ebadi, 2003 Nobel laureate, spoke at a meeting at UNESCO headquarters in Paris on “Religion and Democracy.” Pointing to the misuse of Islam, by a number of politicians to justify their dictatorial rule and abuse of human rights, she said that “being in opposition to the rules of the State could automatically be considered opposition to Islam and that is punishable by law.” However, she added, it is not Islam, a religion of equality and justice, that ought to be blamed for the sad state of affairs in the Muslim world; it is the manipulation of its principles by unscrupulous governments. Shirin invited UNESCO and other international organizations to help Islamic countries by expanding “education for all” so as to reduce the ignorance and illiteracy, that in her view are the root causes of fanaticism.

In private, she is far more guarded, and the reasons are obvious. The prominence of being a Nobel laureate has brought with it a new set of concerns: of how her statements might be taken out of context or deliberately twisted, to enmesh her in political controversy back home in Iran. She speaks

freely of her astonishment at winning the Nobel. She was in Paris on 9 October 2003, preparing to leave for Tehran, when the Norwegian Ambassador to France called and asked that she delay departure by a day: she was one of the three Nobel finalists, along with John Paul II and Vaclav Havel. She thought she was dreaming! The electrifying news that the winner was neither Havel nor the Pope, but she, a 56 years old, largely unknown Iranian woman, came by radio, at 11 that night. The Nobel committee selected her for promoting peaceful, democratic solutions to social problems and inducing new thinking on Islamic terms.

“The prize turned my life around” Shirin says, recalling that it brought both excitement and anxiety. Anxiety, because “the prize has laid a heavy responsibility” on her shoulders, and she could no longer continue her work as a simple lawyer and a social activist. By winning the prize she became a “nightmare for that Government,” one of her friends in Paris told me. That required her to be more guarded in speech in addressing the issues of a society where a woman is not allowed to practice law and be a judge, where any opposition to and criticism of current policies and practices could be considered as subversive.

Asked whether her new fame would help ease the

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struggle of Iranian women for a more equal and better life, she answers curtly that she has “no desire to be considered a paragon of resistance or an ivory tower of intellectual.” However, in her Nobel acceptance speech on 10 December 2003, Shirin addressed the issue I raised: “Undoubtedly, my selection will be an inspiration to the masses of women who are striving to realize their rights, not only in Iran but throughout the region — rights taken away from them through the passage of history. This selection will make women in Iran, and much further afield, believe in themselves.”

But she does not aspire to be a heroine to anyone. All she plans to do is continue her efforts as a lawyer and activist — not as a role model — for other women in the Islamic world. She believes, especially, that Iranian women have reached a level of maturity that precludes the need for a social or political symbol to attain their legal and social rights. Their claims, she believes, have a logic that cannot be ignored by Iranian society. What she does not say, is that her work as writer and speaker, low key, educational, strategic, has undoubtedly had an impact on Iranian attitudes on women’s rights, perhaps even softening the stance of religious ideologues.

### Back Home

When she got back home to Tehran after the announcement of the Nobel, she got a taste of the new realities that now rule her life. Thousands of enthusiasts and supporters had gathered at Mehrabad Airport in Tehran, to greet her, but religious hard-liners blocked their access. Their partisans, carrying banners that expressed shame and dismay that an Iranian had earned the same award as had Menachem Begin, took up the front rows of the crowd, shouting and ranting against her. Later, a group of religious clerics from Qom released a statement saying the Nobel prize was aimed at “ridiculing Islam.” It took a while before the official organs of the Government acknowledged the Nobel award. As it had been given because Shirin was a Muslim woman, the gov-

ernment invited her to use the opportunity to spread the teachings of Islam.

She has accepted that instruction, but in a way surely unexpected by the hard-liners. In her Nobel acceptance speech — delivered in the name of “the God of Creation and Wisdom” — Shirin said: “Islam is a religion whose first sermon to the Prophet begins with the word ‘Recite!’ The Koran swears by the pen and what it writes. Such a sermon and message cannot be in conflict with awareness, knowledge, wisdom, freedom of opinion and expression and cultural pluralism.” Some Muslims, she

### Shirin In Brief

Shirin Ebadi was born in 1947, received a law degree from the University of Teheran and from 1975 to 1979 (during the reign of the Shah), served as the first female judge in Iran. The founder of a non-governmental organization, the *Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child* in Iran (SPRC), she has published a number of books and articles on human rights issues. In defending the rights of political prisoners who had fallen victim to the powerful political and unjust legal system in her country, she has suffered imprisonment and personal threat. In 1999, Shirin was the lead attorney on a number of cases that focused on the use of violence and repression by the Iranian judiciary and security forces in silencing the student movement and its increasingly vocal challenges to Government practices. Her work exposed a link between a high government official and a vigilante group responsible for the brutal treatment of the demonstrators. That work led to her arrest and detention in 2000. Undeterred, she nevertheless remained a committed human rights activist.

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She also noted in her speech that on the 55th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights it was “of extreme concern to observe that under the pretext of cultural relativity, international human rights laws and standards are breached not only by their recognized opponents, but also by the Western democracies — in other words, in those countries who were among the initial codifiers of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is in this framework that, for months, hundreds of individuals who were arrested in the course of military conflicts in Afghanistan and elsewhere, have been imprisoned in Guantanamo, without the benefit of the rights stipulated under the Geneva conventions, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.”

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face the task of reaching remote villages that are difficult even to reach because of the lack of roads and transportation facilities. There is also the problem that AIDS has devastated educators; in some parts of the country up to 50 per cent of teachers are themselves infected. But such difficulties have only served to underline for Cristina the importance of information and education in meeting the challenge.

On her recent trip to African countries, Cristina — a great believer of maintaining and respecting local traditions — noted that traditional theater was an important part of the culture of even remote and isolated villages, and

on inquiry, learned that it has always been important in shaping popular opinions and attitudes. Story-tellers and actors could be important ways to reach those without formal schooling with the message of AIDS prevention. Radio too could play a key role in reaching people in isolated villages, for almost everywhere in Southern Africa people have radios. But even such innovative and low-cost initiatives will need resources. Local road shows will require transportation. Community radio centers will have to be created to reach the very poor. As she told *Paris Match* in March, “I see my role as an intermediary between the donor communities such as the private sector, bi-lateral and multi-lateral entities and those at the local level.”

## 5 Pioneers in Life Science Research Get L’Oreal-UNESCO Awards

By Mehri Madarshahi

On International Women’s Day (8 March), five leading researchers in life sciences from different continents were awarded the 2004 *L’Oreal-UNESCO Prize and Fellowships for Women in Science*. Honored at a ceremony at UNESCO headquarters were: Jennifer Thomson of South Africa, Lucia Mendonca Previato of Brazil, Philippa Marrack of the United States, Nancy Ip of China and Christine Petit of France.

The award winners were selected from among more than 800 nominees by an international interdisciplinary jury of 15 eminent scientists, led by Nobel Prize winners Christian de Duve of Belgium and Guenter Blobel of Germany.

Also awarded were 15 UNESCO-L’ORÉAL fellowships to promising researchers enabling work outside their home countries on topics ranging from cellular biology, to immunology to disease prevention.

The L’ORÉAL-UNESCO partnership began in 1998. It aims to encourage the participation of women in scientific research and promotes awareness of eminent women.

In addition to the annual awards ceremonies, the program is active throughout the year. As an extension to the international partnership, L’Oreal subsidiaries around the world in cooperation with UNESCO National Commissions have established a growing *Program of National Initiatives* to promote, honor and encourage women in science. These initiatives include national fellowships, educational or mentoring programs to introduce young women to careers in science, as well as organizing seminars and conferences. The most notable among these are programs in Poland, Italy, China, Republic of Korea, Turkey, Thailand and the United States.

The annual awards alternate between Life Sciences and Material Sciences. Over the years, they have honored a total of 91 scientists from more than 45 countries. Thirty-one have received prizes for research, and 60 have received

fellowships. In the Life Sciences, prize winners were principally oriented around ground-breaking work in biology, genetics and virology. In the Environmental Sciences, contributions have ranged from the study on the impact of human activity on ecosystems to the development of prevention policies against sea and land pollution. In the Material Sciences, research has focused on the natural properties of matter with a view to improving the quality of our daily life

### Gender gap in Science

Globally, there is at present a serious under-representation of women in science and in scientific research. Women scientists get a disproportionately smaller share of major funding for research, and are less likely to be advanced to levels of increased responsibility in scientific public and private establishments. They stand far less chance of being recognized as successful professionals nationally or internationally.

According to a recent report of the European Commission, women represent 40% of scientists with doctorate degrees. Yet, they represent only one third of public research institutions and universities workers and just over 15% of researchers have been employed in the private sector. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT, USA) found in 2000 that, in spite of specific institutional efforts to improve working conditions for women scientists, “inequitable distributions” were found in work space, salary from individual research grants, teaching assignments, awards and distinctions.