



## **2009 World Conference on Higher Education The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and Development Paris, 5-8 July 2009**

Ten years after the first World Conference on Higher Education, organized by UNESCO in Paris, over 1,200 participants representing a broad range of actors with a vested interest in higher education came together to assess the progress made and challenges remaining in the field of higher education and research. With a four member delegation, the IFUW was one of the few NGOs advocating women's empowerment.

In the opening presentation, Jill Biden, Second Lady of the United States of America, explicitly addressed gender gaps that exist in higher education. She remarked that two thirds of the world's illiterate population consists of women. Additionally, half of all children who are not enrolled in school are girls. After presenting these statistics, she focused on the importance of community colleges and the opportunities they present for women. The flexibility that these colleges offer presents numerous benefits for women. For example, balancing work and family life, and giving lower income adults the chance to work and earn a degree simultaneously. Biden advocated the development of community colleges worldwide in order to give more people the opportunity to participate in higher education.

The need to ensure no discrimination in higher education was stressed throughout the conference. It is important to reverse social inequalities that exist, and to work to make sure there are equal terms of acceptance into higher education institutions. The development of an African higher education and research area was a main focus during the conference. Many African nations stressed that regional specificities must not be ignored, and improvement to higher education must be grounded in civil engagement and social responsibility.

IFUW delegates were especially involved in a parallel session: Women in Higher Education, Research, and Innovation (HERI): Gains and Further Challenges for a Research Agenda. The panelists first presented progress made and obstacles still to overcome in the areas of university leadership / management, in research carriers, and as entrepreneurs in the workplace.

The panelists remarked that cultural and social views on gender have a heavy impact on enrollment and equality in higher education. Equal access does not happen on its own; therefore innovative steps must be taken to create new curriculum promoting equality. Some of the strategies suggested during the interactive discussion included affirmative action for women, research to support change in attitude towards women, review of curriculum, and a stronger voice for NGOs and civil society.

The three main tracks of the conference included, Internationalization, Regionalization, and Globalization, Equity, Access, and Quality, and Learning, Research, and Innovation. It was clear that gender equity was not mainstreamed through the agenda. However, with the rise in awareness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of the benefits women can bring to society, it has become imperative that mainstreaming gender equality at all levels of higher education, research, leadership and management remains a priority in the next decade.

As a result of lobbying for gender mainstreaming, the final communiqué of the conference included several mentions of the importance of gender equality in the field of higher education. Member states were called upon to guarantee women's access, participation and success in higher education. The final communiqué additionally established higher education as a public good and stressed that it should remain the main responsibility of governments.

### **Resources**

Final Conference Communiqué:

[http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/ED/pdf/WCHE\\_2009/FINAL%20COMMUNIQUE%20WCHE%202009.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/ED/pdf/WCHE_2009/FINAL%20COMMUNIQUE%20WCHE%202009.pdf)

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