

My Experiences Of GWI Conferences

I have been attending the GWI (IFUW) conferences since 2004 with 2019 GWI Conference in Geneva being my fifth. Encouraged by the Late Dr. Goolchecher Coyaji, Past IFUWA President, to attend at least one GWI Conference, I registered for the 2004 Conference in Perth, Australia. For the first timer, the conference seemed a little daunting to me, but Dr. Coyaji, who attended along with me, made this a truly enjoyable and memorable event.

Since then I have attended these conferences in various capacities as a voting delegate, young member for leadership training workshop, poster presenter or read paper of fellow member.

Attending these conferences has given me a global view of the issues concerning women's empowerment and role of GWI in it. Every three years national federations and individual members meet at GWI conference to set GWI policy on issues of international concern. It provides members with an opportunity to exchange ideas and experiences, decide on approaches being taken on global issues in their respective local settings through workshops, interdisciplinary seminars, networking, leadership training, plenary discussions and informal meetings. It is an excellent forum to meet talented women from different countries and walks of life, who bring their learned views to the matters at hand.

Other very important aspect of attending GWI Conference was making wonderful friends all over the world.

Carol Hare, GWI Assistant-Treasurer 2013-19 and member of the Canadian Federation (CFUW), I met her at the 2004 Perth conference and since then we have been good friends. She had arranged 'high tea' for the Indian Federation delegates with CFUW members at Istanbul Conference in 2013.

This time in Geneva, I was hosted by Sheila Buemi-Moore, member of Swiss Federation and Convener of Finance Committee 2013-16. We had worked together on the Finance Committee for three years and became good friends. Sheila and her husband were wonderful hosts and made my stay in Switzerland, a memorable one.

Meeting friends and bonding with them and their families have made these conferences a series of enriching experiences

33rd Triennial GWI Conference - 'Peace Through Education'

The 33rd Triennial GWI Conference was special as it was the centenary year of this august organisation which has been in the past 100 years advocating empowerment through education of women and girls on a global scale.

During the 4 days of the conference, I had the privilege to hear eminent speakers on the theme of the conference and keynote plenary discussions. It was a joy to note that quite a few of them were Indians.

'WTO Keynote Discussion on Women's Empowerment' at WTO HQ, was the proverbial cherry on the cake. The discussion highlighted the role of trade, which could be effectively used in fostering peace and women's economic empowerment.

During the conference I attended one workshop and two paper presentations of IFUWA members.

(1) Workshop on '**Unravelling the Patriarchy Within**' by young IFUWA member Shruti Sonthalia.

Inner patriarchy is a part, a voice that holds us back from within. The workshop focused on how to detect this inner conflict, perceive it, build self-esteem, reinvent self-image, recognize and respect the different roles that women play and can play.

This was a new learning for me and felt the time was too short for the workshop. I would recommend holding this workshop for members at one of the IFUWA CC meetings.

(2) Paper Presentation on '**Global Problems Addressed With Local Solutions: An Attempt To Create Environmental Awareness**' by Dr Sushma Moitra and Dr. Nita Mawar. The paper focussed on-

(i) environmental issues in Delhi caused by overpopulation and overuse of resources e.g. poor quality of air, water pollution, ground water problems, etc.

(ii) creating action oriented public environmental awareness especially among the younger generations so that they can think and act accordingly when they are administrators or policy makers.

(iii) public environmental awareness led to campaigns to periodically clean the Yamuna river, policy makers making rainwater harvesting compulsory for certain construction sites, setting up of effluent treatment plants, segregation of household waste, use of eco-friendly material for religious functions, etc.

Today many of our cities and towns also face similar environmental issues. This presentation highlighted possible solutions which could be addressed with the joint efforts of the citizens and the Govt.

(3) Paper Presentation on '**Schooling Interventions : Keep Girls from Dropping Out and Help Women Re-enter**' -Suvarna Gokhale

This was a presentation of two very successful intervention programs by Suvarna Gokhale of Janan Prabodhini in Taluka Velhe of Pune district.

A study was conducted in this rural area and it was observed that there was a high percentage of girls dropping out from schools for various reasons such as village schools were up to 4th grade, girls had to walk up to 12 km per day for high school education which created safety problems, there was no learning family background, due to poverty no proper nourishment to girls, preference given to boys for education and girl's education stopped which lead to early marriage.

Another observation was that the married women of the village did housework and farm labour, studied up to 7th grade and lived in joint family where they had low status and as such were most vulnerable section.

Based on the study, two intervention programs were under taken

(i) To stop girls from dropping out of school, girls' hostel was started, parents were convinced about the benefits of education and girls safety in the hostel. Girls were provided with healthy and nourishing food. Workshops were conducted on personality development and training from life skills.

Today these village girls are able to take benefit of numerous Govt schemes and scholarships offered by the Govt and Educational institutes. They are motivated to complete graduation and attend GWI Conference as women graduates.

(ii) Re-entry of married women into Education- the program reached out to more than 800 married women via micro credit network and got 250 enrolled in Govt Open Universities.

Today 240 have 12th grade equivalent degree and 7 have completed graduation.

These have been very successful intervention programs, indeed.

Attending this conference was a memorable experience of meeting up with friends, exchanging information, interacting with the delegates world over and getting treated to the local culture and cuisine. I hope you get to enjoy such beautiful & enriching experiences too.

Veena Bathe

GWJ Vice President, Legal and Governance 2019-22

GWJ Finance Committee Member 2013-16

Past Hon. Secretary, IFUWA 2011-14

Past President UWA, Pune 2013-15