

Focus: “Global Summit of Women” / 3 questions to Isabelle Gougenheim

Isabelle Gougenheim is delegate general of the Global Summit of Women (GSW) 2014 and President of IDEAS (insert link to website). She agreed to discuss with Aliath this very special event held for the first time in 23 years in France, from 5th to 7th June 2014.

What were the highlights of the Global Summit of Women? And what conclusions do you draw from this 24th edition?

The strong presence and commitment of French women during the Summit, in particular the incumbent Minister for Women’s Rights, Najat Vallaud Belkacem, but also the many French political or economic personalities, showed the extent to which the promotion of women in public life is an important topic in France and how much progress France has achieved on this issue within Europe today.

The impressive number of women ministers representing 40 countries was also a symbol and a high point of this Summit. I would in fact highlight the noteworthy presence of Atifete Jahjag and Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President-in-Office of respectively Kosovo and Malta, as well as of Shahindokht Molaverdi, Iranian Vice-President in charge of Women and Family Affairs. The latter’s attendance was an extraordinary event that generated much interest and many contacts. It is also worth noting the participation of Viviane Redding, European Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship, who received the Summit’s Honour Award. Last but not least, the French female lifetime leadership prize was awarded to Nicole Notat, President of Vigéo.

Generally speaking, the presence of large delegations of women (more than fifty at times) from all over the world (Africa, Americas, Asia, Europe) confirmed once more the truly international scope of the Summit, which for three days made France a choice host by gathering so many extraordinary women, from so many different cultures, providing new ways of seeing the world, so many experiences and best practices to inspire the future. This Summit will thus have been an opportunity to discover countries with growing economies such as Mongolia or Kazakhstan. Initiated by the American NGO, the Summit’s impeccable organisation, characterized by strict time-keeping and round tables starting at 8am, contributed significantly to the atmosphere of the Summit. It provided commitment, generosity, a willingness to share and exchange, and a common desire to progress together.

In short, this Summit was particularly productive and dynamic, and France provided a very warm welcome. It thus not only met its organisational goals but also helped increase the visibility of France and confirm its symbolic position on the question of women. In fact, the Copé-Zimmermann law has pushed France up the ranks in terms of gender diversity in the board room and this was very much noticed – 7 of the 10 companies that rank highest in terms of gender diversity are French.

What lessons can be learnt from the GSW regarding the promotion of women, the key to future progress?

The point of such a Summit is to open our French and European eyes to other ways of living and thinking about the question of women. Elsewhere, we can see that women have achieved their place in society by taking a very different approach to the issues at stake. Our first lesson is therefore the need to reposition ourselves in a broader and more global perspective.

The second teaching is undoubtedly the question of talent pools, which features as a recurrent theme for women to make progress in the economic arena. The ability to network, to identify and develop the influence of women leaders in all areas is a necessary and effective means to encourage the integration of women in the circles where they remain very few or non-existent.

The systematic presentation of female candidates for every recruitment is another powerful tool. While positive discrimination should obviously be avoided when hiring –the final decision should be based on the candidates' intrinsic qualities –it is worth making sure that women also apply for a given position.

The use of quotas, which was widely discussed during the Summit, was unanimously acknowledged to trigger significant progress in achieving gender diversity within companies.

Last but not least, the question of schooling and training was raised once again as closely linked to the issue of promoting women in society.

A final comment?

While the next forum will be held in Brazil in 2015, let us hope that discussions will continue and that the bonds created will be the source of new political and economic collaboration, the engine and accelerator for the promotion of women in the world.