# Unions strive to advance gender equality



**Pictures: Education International**

Achieving gender equality and equity in education and in unions continues to be a top priority for Education International (EI) member organisations.

A new survey of 123 education unions from around the world reveals a strong union commitment and significant progress made, as well as challenges and areas for improvement to advance equity.

Gender equality was in the spotlight at Education International's 10th World Congress in Argentina, with several events and resolutions highlighting the topic and aiming to accelerate progress.

**Increasing diversity in unions and strong union action for gender equality**

Conducted every four years, the survey explores and maps the work of EI member organisations in advancing gender equality and equity in education unions and in education.

The latest edition of the survey indicates several positive developments, including that unions are becoming more inclusive for individuals identifying as women, non-binary or transgender. From 2019 to 2023, the proportion of unions reporting that less than a quarter of their members identified as women dropped from 20 per cent to 12 per cent, while those with 50-74 per cent women members increased from 26 per cent to 28 per cent.

Unions are also taking significant actions to promote gender equality within their own membership and structures. Around 60 per cent of responding unions have implemented written gender equality policies and 52 per cent have gender quota policies. Most of these policies were introduced after 2015, indicating a trend towards the adoption of progressive policies.

Of the surveyed unions, 61 per cent report initiatives against gender-based violence in their union, with a major focus on raising awareness. In addition, over 50 per cent of unions have embedded Convention 190 of the International Labour Organisation within their structures, joining the global movement to end violence and harassment in the world of work.

Around 80 per cent of unions conduct training activities focused on gender issues and non-discrimination in education, aiming to increase gender equality in decision-making structures.

Furthermore, 70 per cent of unions have established advisory committees or networks on gender-related issues.

The survey also shows that unions continue to work to promote and advance gender-transformative education. Unions are working to challenge stereotypes, attitudes, norms and practices through teacher training and curriculum development.

Unions are also advocating for the rights of marginalised groups, such as students living in extreme poverty, students with disabilities, out-of-school children and students from remote rural areas, showing that many already take an intersectional approach to working towards gender equality.

**Challenges persist: Leadership roles and growing anti-feminism**

Despite strong gains in membership diversity and the growing use of quota systems and gender equality policies, senior leadership roles in education unions continue to be male dominated.

The survey shows that only 25 per cent of general secretaries and 40 per cent of deputy general secretaries are women, with little improvement since 2010. This is attributed to disproportionate workloads, societal and community expectations and the scrutiny faced by women which prevent them from pursuing leadership positions.

Supporting and encouraging women's leadership in education unions is a key priority for Education International.

> *"Women's leadership is not just about achieving equality; it is about enriching our educational environments and ensuring that every voice is heard and valued. We must recognise that diverse leadership is not just beneficial; it is essential for creating innovative solutions and driving sustainable progress."*
>
> *Johanna Jaara Åstrand, Education International Vice President*

Unions also warned about the threat to progress posed by increasingly powerful far right and anti-feminist movements, as well as conservative religious political parties which can put pressure on organisations and individuals to retain or regress to social norms that restrict the basic human rights of women and marginalised groups.

**Gender equality**

Gender equality and equity in education unions and education more broadly was highlighted extensively at EI's 10th World Congress taking place in Buenos Aires, Argentina from 26 July to 2 August.

On 28 July, hundreds of women education unionists and allies came together for the Women's Caucus, an inclusive platform aiming to address the unique challenges faced by women in the education sector, advance gender equality and challenge longstanding disparities in the field of education and the world of work.

"Through this caucus, we aim to amplify the voices of women in our unions," stressed Johanna Jaara Åstrand, EI vice president, in her opening speech at the Women's Caucus.

"Too often, these voices have been marginalised and overlooked. Yet, it is these very voices that offer unique perspectives and solutions to some of the most pressing challenges we face today.

"By centering and prioritising women's experiences in education and in our unions, we pave the way for more inclusive policies, practices and outcomes. Your voices, your stories and your solutions are the driving force behind our collective progress."

Haldis Holst, EI deputy general secretary, presented the results of the latest EI gender survey and how it can help inform union action for gender equity going forward.

The Caucus also gave participants the opportunity to hear from colleagues from around the world on a variety of highly relevant topics, including comprehensive sexuality education and fighting curricular restrictions in the United States, union mobilisation to end school-related gender-based violence in Africa, the experience of Irish unionists in implementing a comprehensive menopause policy, insights from colleagues from New Zealand on approaching climate change as a feminist issue and the work of education unionists in Paraguay on the care economy, its connection with education and its role in fostering equitable societies.

*“We are women. We are for peace, for democracy, for the autonomy of our people. For sovereignty, for solidarity and for inclusion. We are committed to the defence of public education. Viva the women of Education International, viva public education across the world.”*

*Fátima da Silva, General Secretary of the CNTE, Brazil*

One of the highlights of the Caucus was the session honouring and celebrating the struggle and the legacy of the mothers and grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo: the women who stood up for their missing children and grandchildren, helped shine a light on the human rights abuses of the regime at the international level and were instrumental in bringing dictatorship to an end in Argentina.

Moderated by Sonia Alesso, EI Executive Board member and general secretary of CTERA Argentina, the session featured interventions from María Adela Gard de Antokoletz, member of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo - Founding Line, Claudia Victoria Poblete Hlaczik, recovered granddaughter - Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo and leading Argentine educators and feminists Dora Barrancos and Graciela Morgade.

*The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect any official policies or positions of the AEU or SSTUWA. This article was first published on the Education International website and has been reproduced here with permission.*





Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
ABN 54 478 094 635 © 2026