

# ICGS Conference

12.7.22 Stratford, London

The International Coalition of Girls' Schools (ICGS) is focused on advancing girls' education globally, through advocacy, networking, researching and professional development. Highsted was invited to their annual student conference, for which representatives from years 12 & 10 were selected. It was an honourable and unique opportunity to attend on behalf of our school; we were the voices representing the Highsted community in discussions of unconscious bias, inclusion & diversity, and equality. It was a day filled with female empowerment, endowing us with an unexplainable sense of pride.

Upon arrival at the FCA, we were given name badges and provided with refreshments. A sense of professionalism was prevalent, but the informality of later networking opportunities made for a relaxed, yet captivating atmosphere. Below shows us getting ready for our day of important talks (with the refreshments, of course!)



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The conference began with speeches by headteachers Rae Potter and Maria Noone, who focused on the great potential of all-girls schools; female empowerment in these environments builds our characters with confidence and leadership. But, we must take it further than this: the glass-ceiling is still present in the workplace, and the pandemic highlighted gender inequality through a rise in domestic abuse. Society has progressed, but not far enough, and it is through conferences like this that greater awareness can be spread.

Here we all are, ready to discover how we can change the World!



And then came the awe-inspiring talk by Llando Du Plooy, the co-founder of 'Education for Change'. Despite having a negative childhood in South Africa because of the evident racial split, he dedicates his life to improving the life opportunities of every child in Newham, through his programme that aims to eradicate any discrimination within schools. By surrounding himself with 'women of integrity', he noticed the striking ferocity and passion we display when fighting for something; we are all capable of provoking change within society, just that we must be courageous in our actions. As Llando asserted, 'you can stay where you are loved, or you can go to where you are needed' - young women are catalysts for change, and hence should take the step of speaking up.



## **'You can stay where you are loved, or you can go to where you are needed' - Llando Du Plooy**

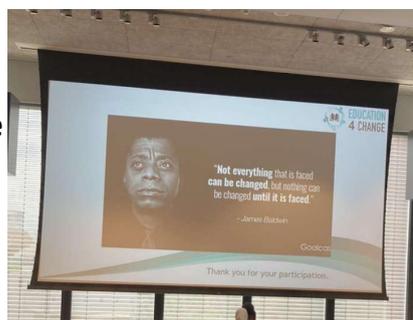
Part of going to where we are needed is by initiating so-called 'difficult' discussions, like that of racism and how unconscious bias plays a huge role in determining negative stereotypes. The more attention these matters have supports the destruction of ethnic/gender barriers that history has constructed for us.

Before we got stuck into our workshops, there was an opportunity for networking in the break; this meant questioning and conversing with the speakers and other students. We approached Bethan Hunt, a senior associate at FCA, who freely told us her story and gave her best advice. Despite having to retake her A-levels due to illness, and repeating her 2nd year at University because of family issues, she was able to refocus and redirect her life. Now advising some of the World's leading banks in her role at FCA, she is the prime example of a young lady who refused to be reduced by the barriers she faced. Upon asking her for her best advice, she replied that to 'picture yourself where you want to be' is the top goal to have.

## **'Picture yourself where you want to be' - Bethan Hunt**

In the afternoon, we split into pairs and attended a range of workshops, to get as much exposure to each topic as possible. One of great interest was delivered by Aliyah Irabor-York, founder of the student-led movement 'Pupil Power'. Her workshop on the empowerment of young people to be active agents of change underpinned the whole day; with a variety of barriers present for us in society, the removal of them will only come from our generation. Change starts with us. Not the government, not teachers, but us, the students. Undoubtedly, we'll work as a collective to achieve equality, but the drive and passion begins with young people. Aliyah interrogated us for our 'why?' Why do you get angry at this, why do you want to change it? Because once we have established our 'why?', we can channel our frustration into making a difference in society.

**'Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced'.**



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Following on from the idea that change starts with us, was the workshop led by Carleene Lee-Phakoe, Labour Party Councillor for Newham. She, like the others, started with her story: her youngest son was diagnosed with autism and had to fight for him, as a result of the poor quality of special education services in her area. After her husband applied to be a Councillor, she decided she was just as capable as fulfilling the position, so applied too. With a successful outcome, Carleene has spent the past 4 years campaigning for better child provision services in Newham, receiving £1.5 million in government funding and having the support of 60 other Councillors behind her. At the forefront of her work is the belief that it's crucial to invest in young people, because we are the future. Her most important point was that 'there will not be a better campaigner for us than ourselves'.

## **'If we don't fight for what is right, then who will fight for us?' - Cllr Carleene Lee-Phakoe**

In addition to this, a simple yet resonating message was that of 'Education for Change', who highlighted the importance of being 'conscious of the unconscious bias'. We all make generalisations and unconscious judgements of people, but in a world where the subconscious belief that women are inferior to men exists, it is dangerous for society. To help with this, it's crucial to rid the 'Them v Us' mindset, for equality can only be achieved when society works as a collective. Stereotypes are inherent, but being honest with oneself and recognising when you're being unconsciously biased is key. The organisation also touched on the 'white privilege', which is where a white person may have had life difficulties, but not because of the colour of their skin, opposed to an ethnic minority who might have. This is a commonly misunderstood concept, so spreading awareness around it will help in preventing the restrictive effects of the unconscious bias.

Therefore, with a host of information and new, inspiring perspectives on society, we are excited to share it all with the rest of the Highsted community. Our next steps will be to present an assembly summarising the concepts we were told about, and introduce the 'one for all, and all for one' vision for our school. Although Highsted is a warm and friendly environment, we want to educate the students further, so instead of just understanding, they can strive to be 'agents for change' in society.

**By Millie Maskell, on behalf of the ICGS student attendees**