

Number of researchers rising globally but women still in minority – UN report

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November 24, 2009 -- Although the number of researchers working in developing countries over the last five years has increased by 50 per cent, women only occupy a very small percentage of these positions in some regions, according to a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report released today.

The UNESCO report, published by the agency's Institute for Statistics (UIS), noted that between 2002 and 2007 almost 1 million new researchers were counted in developing countries, bringing the total number to 2.7 million and increasing its global share from around 30 per cent to over 38 per cent. Asia benefited from the largest rise in researchers, mainly due to China increasing its share from 14 to 20 per cent in five years. "The increase in the number of researchers, notably in developing countries, is good news," said UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova. "Although the participation of women in science, which UNESCO promotes notably through the L'Oréal-UNESCO Awards for Women in Science, is still too limited," stressed Ms. Bokova. According to the new UIS study, women represent less than 30 per cent of the researchers in the world, a figure that hides numerous regional disparities. In Latin America, 46 per cent of researchers are women and gender parity has been achieved in Argentina, Cuba, Brazil, Paraguay and Venezuela, whereas in South Asia women only represent 18 per cent. The report noted that in Europe only the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Republic of Moldova and Serbia have achieved gender parity. In the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), women's participation in research is 43 per cent, compared to 33 per cent in Africa. In addition, the report said that expenditure on research and development (R&D) is increasing, with rises in the percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) devoted to R&D in most countries, which now stands at 1.74 per cent on average around the world from 1.71 per cent in 2002. The report also noted that in most developed countries, R&D is largely financed by the private sector – 60 per cent in North America and 50 per cent in Europe – while in Latin America and the Caribbean it ranges from 25 to 50 per cent. In Africa, however, research is financed mostly by the public sector. "Policy makers seem to realize more and more that innovation is key for economic growth, to the point of setting R&D investment targets," said UNESCO Institute of Statistics Programme Specialist Martin Schaaper. "China is the foremost example of a country setting a target – 2 per cent by 2010 and 2.5 per cent or more by 2020 – and being well on its way to reaching it," said Mr. Schaaper, who is also one of the authors of the report. "Another example is given by the African Science and Technology Consolidated Plan of Action (CPA), which sets a target of 1 per cent of GDP devoted to R&D."