

International PEN Women Writers' Committee at the PEN Congress in Bled, 2005

Minutes of the meetings held 14 and 17 June

A list of names and email addresses is appended at the end of these minutes.

1. Those present introduced themselves and said a few words about their centres.
 - (a) Lucina Kathmann (San Miguel PEN) presented an appreciation of the late Fatou Ndiaye Sow, a valued member of this committee. Lucina showed us a scrapbook of pictures of her and spoke movingly about her personal friendship and her new understanding of Islam thanks to Fatou.
 - (b) We heard of the problems of illiteracy in Sierra Leone.
 - (c) Independent Chinese PEN complained of the authoritarianism of mainland China.
 - (d) Tibetan PEN spoke of the problem of women writers being outnumbered by male writers and the consequent lack of valorisation for women writers.
 - (e) The Basque Centre, is very new. Its priorities are writers in prison and translation and linguistic rights. They campaign in bookshops and produce posters for women writers in Basque.
 - (f) Kristin Schnider (Swiss-German PEN) reported that even in an affluent, "progressive" country like Switzerland there was still subtle discrimination against women in the form of unequal wages and the "glass ceiling". It was common to find literary anthologies "with 27 men and 2 women".
 - (g) Ekbal Baraka (Egyptian PEN) explained that women's situation in Egypt is not as good now as it was 10 years ago. Women are struggling against this. She writes novels, plays, and a column in *El Ahram*. She finds that the big problem now is the abuse of Islam by practitioners of it.
 - (h) Tessa Ransford (Scottish PEN) reported that there is a new anthology of 20th –century Scottish women writers.
 - (i) Ren Powell (Norwegian PEN) said that in Norway there was still discrimination against women. They were underrepresented in anthologies and in the academic world there was a smaller percentage of women.
 - (j) Gabriela Adame_teanu (Romanian PEN) said that in Romanian PEN there is no problem vis-a-vis women writers, but in society as a whole there were many problems, such as domestic violence and the trafficking in women and children.
2. **Standing Orders.** In a discussion of the Standing Orders of the committee we decided to delete nos. 5 and 9 and query section 8d.
3. **Website.** We are to send news of publications to our website. Ren Powell suggested a listserver for discussion groups and offered to look into the details for this. Jane Spender (International PEN) said that a link with International PEN's website would be good.
- (4) **Meeting in Romania.** Gabriela Adamesteanu suggested a meeting of the Committee in 2008 in Sibiu, situated in an art of the Southern Carpathians. The town was built by Germans in the 14th century, but then became Hungarian and Roumanian. At the moment a German is the mayor of it. It is a very multi-cultural place. Gabriela would like a conference there, if not a PEN Congress, because Sibiu is going to be a European Capital of Culture in 2007.
- (5) **Other business.** We discussed ways of celebrating International Women's Day on March 8.

The second IPWWC meeting. 17 June 2005

- (1) **Standing Order.** The amendments were proposed by Lucina Kathmann and seconded by Chiara Macconi and approved by a unanimous vote.
- (2) **Our function.** How to define our brief or function? We discussed the case of Fanny Eddy, a lesbian activist in Sierra Leone, who has been attacked for her writing . Is this outside our remit or not? How do we decide? We were reminded to send any information of cases to Tiina Pystinen (Finnish PEN) or our president, Judy Buckrich (Melbourne PEN). Quick action is essential.
- (3) **Black women writers.** Kadija George (African Writers Abroad PEN) reported on the activities of her centre. Recently there was a black women writers and publishers conference with workshops. There was a serious problem with children's books, for some publishers refused books with black children on the cover because they were "the wrong colour". This has been a very positive year—there was an African arts season in England, and four African women were published. A black British woman won the very prestigious Orange First Novel Prize.
- (4) **Women Defending Peace.** Fawzia Assad is our representative to the Women Defending Peace group.
- (5) **Nigerian prize-winners.** Remi Raji (Nigerian PEN) told us that women writers in Nigeria have recently won several prizes.
- (6) **Swedish success.** Björn Linnen (Swedish PEN) reported that Swedish women have had a successful meeting with Iranian women. The Iranian women were collecting books for a library for women and children and were working on the project together with Dutch PEN. The reading public in Sweden were predominantly women. The most important novelists are men but the poets are women. The publishers target stereotyped women.
- (7) **Croatia.** Sibila Petlevski (Croatian PEN) said that Croatia had many high-quality authors, but the gender preferences were different from those of Sweden. Now women were writing hard-boiled, rough fiction. She had been investigated by secret agents for her journalism. There was a public discussion, but she lost her job. The case had now been resolved publicly in her favour. There were positive examples in publishing; there was a very successful series of Femina editions.
- (8) **Poland.** Anna Nasiowska (Polish PEN) reported that one problem in Poland was the rigid influence of the Church, which had made abortions unobtainable, and there were also numerous social problems. There were many younger women writers, however.
- (9) **Turkey.** Aysu Erden (Turkish PEN) reported anthologies of prison literature with contributions by both men and women.
- (10) **TLRC website.** Kata Kulakova (Macedonian PEN) is on the Translation and Linguistics Rights Committee and drew our attention to the website of the TLRC, where there were many women writers and also many women translators.
- (11) **Ciudad Juárez.** Maria Elena Ruiz (Mexican PEN) suggested a short resolution now about the ongoing series of murders of women in Ciudad Juárez in northern Mexico. We agreed that a few people should compose this declaration now during the meeting. (See item 19)

(12) **Bishkek Forum.** Vera Tokombaeva (Kyrgyzstan PEN) was organizing a Women's Forum in Bishkek to be held next week (to which some of the IPWWC members would go). There were many creative women in Kyrgyzstan, but they didn't know each other. This Forum would be a valuable networking experience for them on a national level and also a wonderful chance to meet women writers from outside the country. The publicity around the event would raise their profile in the country and enhance their own self-esteem.

(13) **Swiss-Italian.** Chiara Macconi (Swiss-Italian PEN) told us that her PEN centre didn't deal with women's problems because there were other activist groups that did that. In Italy book production was quite traditional; feminism was "a bit naughty" or "passé". There was a problem of marketing women's writing. A new phenomenon was that of women writing in men's voices.

(14) **Esperanto.** Issue number 1 of Femina has appeared, a magazine produced jointly by Esperanto PEN and the Esperanto women's committee.

(15) **Kurdish PEN.** Moustafa Rechid (Kurdish PEN) proposed a project for children's literature. IPWWC might be a possible umbrella for it.

(16) **South American prize-winners.** Cecilia Balcázar (Colombian PEN) reported that two South American women have recently won awards, one in Peru and a poet in Colombia.

(17) **Former Soviet Union.** Elisabeth Nordgren (Finnish PEN) was working on a literary seminar concerning women in the former Soviet Union.

(18) **Sierra Leone.** Esmé James (Sierra Leone PEN) thanked everyone for the gifts of stationery for the school project of her centre.

(19) **Declaration.** Declaration on the Murders of Women in Ciudad Juárez (presented by Maria Elena Ruiz, translated by Lucina Kathmann). This was unanimously approved and sent on to the central committee.

(20) **General Discussion of Future Work.** Judith Buckrich (president) proposed a regular women's meeting after every second Congress. If so, the next one would be in 2007 after the Dakar Congress. Kadija George said that as there was already much emphasis on West Africa, it would be better to have it in another part of Africa. It will be expensive and difficult for anyone not already there, *wherever* it is.

Judith Buckrich suggested that it could probably be done in Senegal or possibly next door in Gambia, but Caroline Whitaker (International PEN) pointed out that funding bodies would want us to stay put in one place, as there would not be a good reason for running around to other places.

Chiara Macconi suggested building our themes around specific cases. Gabriela was in touch with a network of African writers, editors, and publishers. Kadija George reminded us that we must contact all the other African women's groups to let them know how our plans progress. Judith Buckrich suggested a planning committee. It was appointed on the spot: Ekbal Baraka, Kadija George, Judith Buckrich, Esmé James, Ren Powell, and Elisabeth Nordgren.

Finally, we were reminded to send any news of women writers to Judith Buckrich (judithbuckrich@optusnet.com.au) for the website.

Sarah Lawson, secretary

2005 IPWWC list of women at Bled

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