

Report of PEN International Women Writers Committee

Québec, October 13, 2015

Ekbal Baraka, chair of the PIWWC, opened the well-attended meeting. All three candidates for International President had been invited to come to address our meeting briefly. Two were available immediately: Vida Ognienovic, Serbian PEN, and Jennifer Clement, Mexico PEN. Zeynep Oral, Turkey PEN, the third candidate, arrived later.

Vida talked to us about the necessity of more and better networking and more impulse for PEN's literary side.

Jennifer regretted that our charter makes no reference to gender. She also spoke of violence as censorship and an idea of prizes for men who support feminism.

Zeynep talked of her involvement in the international women's movement with particular reference to the UN's Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985, which she attended.

Jennifer Clement was elected the first woman President of PEN International in the PEN General Assembly on October 15, a historic event.

The next item was a report on the PIWWC regional meeting in Bled, Slovenia, a new initiative this year. The meeting took place immediately after the regular annual Writers for Peace Committee meeting for the practical advantages of dovetailing the meetings. Clara Franceschetti reported on this meeting. Its special focus was an idea for a Declaration of the Rights of Women. The text, still inchoate at this point, refers to the right to physical integrity and the right to education. This text is conceived as being of particular relevance to freedom of expression.

Tanja Tuma, organizer of this meeting who was unexpectedly able to attend the Congress, asked us to accept formally the idea that another PIWWC meeting be held on May 10, 2016, that is, one day before the projected writers for Peace conference, in the coming year. The meeting accepted this proposal. (So please make note of that date and attend if you can.)

The issue of education was mentioned by Tanja Tuma and echoed by many participants when they reported on the situation in their region. For example, Faith Oneya of Kenya said that women writers in her country are very much underrepresented in awards and do not get contracts for schoolbooks, called set books, which are worth a lot of money.

Sheng Xue of Chinese Writers Abroad told her story of leaving China 26 years ago after the Tiananmen Square incident and never being able to go back.

Hala el Badry spoke of the very confused situation in Egypt since the Tahrir Square manifestations in 2011. This has affected Ekbal as well.

Ayako Sato said that in Japan the situation was much better than what she had heard in the other reports. There are many women writers and the universities in particular make an effort to be gender-fair.

Sarah Mansilla of Bolivia said that her country, and particularly her city of Santa Cruz (14th fastest growing city in the world) is in a period of rapid expansion with a very young population. She

said, “We work hard to combat ignorance and lack of reading.”

Berivan Dosky spoke of the situation of the Kurdish women, who live with bombardment and fighting all around, destroying their homes, forcing them into exile to save their lives. In addition she talked of the many Yezidi Kurdish women who were taken into captivity by ISIS and have been sold as slaves in markets. The Kurdish PEN center would sponsor a resolution in the General Assembly about the situation of these women, whose right to freedom of expression and even mere survival is in jeopardy.

We adjourned for lunch.

The afternoon session began with the procedures for the election of a new committee chair. (Ekbal had announced some time ago that she was stepping down.) Judith Rodriguez supervised and we duly filled out our ballots. It was not a contested election, our candidate was Elisabeth Nordgren from Finland, a regular for many years in the PIWWC who had in fact stood for election as its committee chair before. She accepted her election with some words about her plans for trying to promote conferences for women writers.

Québec PEN had been asked especially to send a writer to talk about women writers in Québec. Wherever we gather, we understand that we always have a rare opportunity to find out about the situation of our colleagues in that place. Germaine Beaulieu was called upon to talk about this. She had started by circulating a questionnaire among 20 of her colleagues to make sure her remarks were not skewed by her own experience. She said that women in Québec are free to write, they are not censored or repressed, but they suffer from a large number of prejudices that run contrary to their success. For example, men writers get more critical attention, invitations to literary events, Women writers get fewer promotions etc. Also people prefer translations of foreign books to books by local writers. They also prefer books from France, These are all quite familiar prejudices; Germaine said they could be summed up with the notion that “What is good comes from outside.”.. all contributing to a chronic low self-esteem among women writers. In addition there is more categorization of the work of women writers than men and a chronic underrepresentation of writers from first nations. She recommended stronger networks of women writers, in part as an antidote to the “old boys” networks.

This intervention was translated to English; everyone wanted to know what Germaine had said. Later other quebeoise writers were offered to speak (fortunately there were quite a few in attendance) and some said they did not want to speak as they had answered Germaine's questionnaire and thus were already represented.

Hori Takeaki and John Ralston Saul came to the meeting to talk about their ideas about the women writers committee. Among other things they suggested the Women Writers Committee consider being a Gender Committee so as to include LGBTQI issues and also to include more men.

Kai Aarenleid from Estonia spoke to say they have peace in their country, but nonetheless compared to the Nordic countries they still have a long way to go to reach equality.

Gioconda Belli said that in Nicaragua, beside many problems already mentioned by others there was also a great deal of literary piracy. She reminded us that the problems we discuss are also the business of all the other committees and not to be relegated to this committee.

Carles Torner and Romana Cacchioli came to talk about the situation with the PEN central

office and PEN's relation with the United Nations. The PEN offices have moved to a new building. PEN's financing from SIDA has been extended another four years. A restructuring of the office work means that there is now more regional coordination. It is possible for PEN to support more projects from the global south. Thus they request suggestions.

A review of how PEN approaches gender is in the offing. The UN's special topic this year is Violence against Women. The central office requests also information about cases for their intervention.

Ekbal talked about the political problem in the Muslim world, how it is that the Muslim religion has been corrupted to serve as the temporal authority in such a repressive way. Her short article about this, "We are all *Charlie Hebdo*," is available on www.piwwc.org

After thanking Ekbal for her years of service, the meeting was adjourned.

Please remember to read and contribute to the Women Writers' Committee's special website and social media outlets: www.piwwc.org @piwwc "Our Voice" facebook page.

Respectfully submitted, Lucina Kathmann
Secretary, PEN International Women Writers Committee