

PEN International Women Writers Committee



Nawal al
Saadawi
1991...

Then

and

Now



...Pussy Riot
2013

A Memory

Joanne Leedom-Ackerman

Twenty years ago in January, 1986 at International PEN's Congress in New York City, the Women Writers Committee was first conceived, though it didn't officially become a standing committee of International PEN until 1991.

Here is my memory of my own participation. I was at the Congress as a member of PEN Los Angeles Center (currently PEN USA); we had been registered along with the foreign delegates. I was a fairly new member of PEN and knew very few of the writers there. I sat through panel after panel and grew increasingly uncomfortable because the speakers were almost all male. I mentioned that to an editor friend who wasn't at the Congress, and she said, "You should say something." I thought, "Yeah, sure, I'm going to stand up and say something in front of all those writers."

The next day I was sitting in the chandeliered grand ballroom of the hotel about to listen to another all-male panel and muttered to the person next to me, "Where are the women?" My memory is that I was sitting behind Toni Morrison, who said, "You should say something." Is that memory true? Did Toni Morrison, one of the writers I most admired, really tell me to say something? It's possible my memory has embellished that, but what is not embellished is that I did say something, prompted by the following statement from a panelist. "Since the 19th century, rationality has been the sole criterion for citizenship in the United States." He then went on to discuss whatever the panel was about. The theme of the Congress was "The Writers' Imagination and the Imagination of the State," a controversial topic since many writers argued that the state had no imagination.

At the question and answer period, I rose and said something to the effect, "I beg to differ, in the 19th century rationality was the sole criterion for citizenship only if you were white and male....But what is also bothering me at this Congress is the lack of women on the panels. Where are the women writers?"

Then I sat down. Part of me thought, "I can't believe you just did that. Well, at least you said what was on your mind," I told myself. Little did I realize that it was on many women's minds at the Congress, and once the question was asked, those women writers who did know each other, including Grace Paley and others, mobilized.

A meeting was called. I was asked, along with two other women writers, to take down the women's protest statement. The only picture of the PEN Congress on the front page of *The New York Times* was of that women's

meeting. In the foreground was the executive director of American PEN in a debate with Betty Freidan. In the background at the table taking down the statement of the women was Meredith Tax, who was chairing the meeting and one of the founders of PEN's Women Writers Committee, another writer Erica Duncan, and myself.



Foreground: left – Karen Kennerly, Executive Director of American PEN Center, right – Betty Friedan, Background: (L. to R) Starry Krueger, Joanne Leedom-Ackerman, Meredith Tax.

Norman Mailer, president of the host PEN American Center, helped the cause of the women when he tried to explain the absence of women. He said that more women had been invited but hadn't come, then he added that the organizers had wanted writers AND intellectuals, and there were not that many women intellectuals. God bless Margaret Atwood, who I still remember being witty and blistering in her response on behalf of the women.

After that New York meeting, I returned to Los Angeles with considerably more writer friends in New York. A few years later I became president of PEN Los Angeles Centre, (whose name changed to PEN USA West) and Meredith Tax, Grace Paley and other women, rallied from countries around the globe, set about organizing the Women Writers Committee to bring the voice and spirit of women writers into higher profile in PEN, most of whose forums at the time were largely male. That same year a Women Writers Committee started at American PEN. We all met at the intervening Congresses, and finally at the PEN Congress in Vienna in 1991 the International Women Writers Committee was born as a standing committee of International PEN.

A History of the PEN International Women Writers Committee

Lucina Kathmann

The history of the PEN International Women Writers Committee (PIWWC) is actually many histories. One is a regional history, for example, the PIWWC's work in French-speaking Africa, Latin America or Scandinavia. When we first talked about what we remembered, many stories emerged, reflecting the areas of the world in which we live, reflecting its ethnic and geographical diversity. In each region the cast of characters is different, but the goals remain the same: the betterment of the situation of women and above all, women writers.

The PIWWC is the most geographically diverse of PEN International's committees. It is also the only committee in PEN to be based outside of Europe, and, though very well represented in Europe, it has maintained a tradition of being coordinated from different regions.

Except for very few specific projects, the PIWWC has never had financial resources. It has no dues, no subvention from PEN International or individual PEN centers. Some projects have paid bills thanks to anonymous donations from within the committee. Often the host center of the chair or the chair herself have, knowingly or not, absorbed the cost of extra communications for the PIWWC. This makes its considerable history of activity even more noteworthy.

Like all the other committees in PEN International, the PIWWC meets every year at the PEN International World Congress. Meetings are invariably well-attended and lively.

In the years since the creation of the PIWWC, the profile of women within PEN International has been raised markedly. No formal study of this has been done, but the days of panels featuring 12 men writers and no women at World Congresses, which many of us remember, are over. However, to date there has never been a woman president of PEN International.

The Women Writers Committee was voted into existence at PEN's General Assembly in Vienna in November of 1991. Meredith Tax of American PEN Center served as its first chair. The committee has been involved in many projects, most of which are ongoing:

Creation of New PEN Centers:

Especially around the time of its inception in 1991, a number of new PEN centers were created through the direct efforts of members of the Women Writers Committee. In the early years María Arrillaga, then President of Puerto Rican PEN, made a number of personal contacts which led directly to the creation of PEN centers in Latin America. The Women Writers Committee (WWC) remains well represented in new centers and in the development of new centers. Meredith Tax, first chair of the WWC; observed that active participation of women in a center, especially from the outset, promoted center stability.



Meredith Tax
1991 – 1994

Including the Spanish language:

The WWC was very active in the promotion of the campaign for accepting Spanish as a working language of PEN, a decision which was finally accepted by the PEN General Assembly in 1996.

The WWC continues to support diversity. Frequently women speak through interpreters in Committee meetings, giving the first access to participation by these delegates. The WWC has given a chance to build confidence to these and other delegates who have later been heard in other committees and the General Assembly.

Involvement with the UN:

In 1995, then-chair Greta Rana took a delegation of women writers to Beijing to the UN's 4th World Conference on Women. That gave the PIWWC the right to attend the sessions of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York every February/March. Tsung Su, of Chinese Writers Abroad PEN, and Lucina Kathmann, of San Miguel PEN, have done so ever since.

Frankfurt Book Fair:

In 1993 the Women Writers Committee sponsored a "South-North Publishing Workshop" at the Frankfurt Book Fair, with the intention to connect women writers from the south with publishers from the north.

Trilingual Newsletter:

Every year before the PEN Congress from the fall of 1993 to the summer of 2003, *Network/Le Réseau/La Red*, the trilingual newsletter of the Women Writers Committee appeared as a magazine on tabloid paper, edited by Lucina Kathmann, photocomposed by Charles Kuschinski and then, after his death, by Lucina Kathmann. It was printed by the office of the newspaper *Correo* in Guanajuato Mexico and mailed to all the representatives of the WWC around the world, then it was distributed at the PEN Congress and in the hall during the sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women at the UN in New York.



Lucina
Kathmann
1996 – 2000

The newsletter contained reports of activities of women writers in various centers and a letter from the chair. It also contained excerpts from the work of women writers whose work highlighted issues of the Committee. Some of these writers were already famous, such as Rosa Montero *Network Vol 2*, 1994, and Mariet Meester, *Vol.11*, 2003, and some became famous soon after, such as Doris Pilkington Garimara, who wrote *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* the year after an excerpt from her first novel appeared in *Network Vol 4*, 1996.

Network also featured texts by women who had been jailed or threatened for their writings, like María Elena Cruz Varela, Helen Mack (on behalf of her murdered sister Myrna), Taslima Nasrin, Flora Brovina, Asiye Gúsel Zeybek. It also contained the yearly reports that Tsung Su and Lucina Kathmann wrote on the sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women sessions at the United Nations in New York.

When Judith Buckrich was elected chair of the PIWWC in 2003, the Network newsletter moved to being produced in Australia. It was published in three languages twice or three times a year until 2009. The print version was available at first but finally, as the internet became almost universal, it was available online only.

Regional conferences and books published as a result of conferences:

1995, Encuentro de Escritoras Latinoamericanas *Censura y Autocensura* August, 1995, published by Guadalajara PEN Center, memoirs of the Latin-American women writers conference on “Censorship and Self-Censorship” in Guadalajara. Organized by Martha Cerda.



Martha Cerda
2000 – 2003

1996, Workshop on the *Barriers to Women Writing in South Asia*, held August, 1996 in Bhaktapur, Nepal. Published by Nepal PEN Center, bilingual, memoirs of the South Asian women writers conference held in Bhaktapur, Nepal. Organized by Greta Rana.



Greta Rana
1994 – 1996

1998, Second Latin American women writers conference on Censorship and Self-Censorship, December 1998, Guadalajara. Three volumes of papers from this conference published in Spanish as *Libertad Condicional* and one volume in English, published as *Conditional Liberty*, La Luciérnaga

Press, Guadalajara, 2000. Organized by Martha Cerda.

2001, First Iberoamerican Conference of Alternative Publishers, Guadalajara. More than 70 editors, translators and writers from seven countries attended. The memoirs were published as *Biblioteca de Babel* by the Secretary of Culture of the State of Jalisco and the SOGEM writers' school. Organized by Martha Cerda.

2005, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. This conference, held immediately after the PEN International World Congress in Bled, began a series of conferences to strengthen the Central Asian region's participation in PEN. Organized by Vera Tokombaeva (Iverson) and Judith Buckrich.



Judith Buckrich
2003 – 2009

2007, Finland. A follow-up conference for Central Asian women writers was organized in by the Women Writers Committee of Finnish PEN by Rita Dahl. Two publications from the followup conference: *Kyltymätön uuni - The Insatiable Furnace*, 2007, Finland, and *The Nightingale in a Cage*, 2008, Kyrgyzstan.

2007, Dakar, Senegal. This conference followed immediately on the PEN International World Congress in Dakar. Because many women intended to stay on for the women's conference, there were many more women delegates to the PEN Congress. Papers from this conference were published on the WWC's website. Both the Bishkek conference and the Dakar conference were made possible through an anonymous donor.

Our Voice books:

This is a series of four anthologies collected and printed by hand by Biblioteca de Textos Universitarios in Salta, Argentina. A notice was sent that any women writer from any PEN Center could send a text which did not contradict PEN values in any of the three official languages, English, French or Spanish. The text would be placed directly in the volume without editing. This was helpful for writers from countries with very weak and discriminatory publishing industries; but in fact there were submissions from writers of every region including writers with many successful publications.

First Volume: 2001

Second Volume: 2001

Third Volume: 2005

Fourth Volume: 2008 The fourth volume can be found online by this link: <http://tinyurl.com/nzt8lev>



Kadija George
2009-2011

Literary prizes:

In 2003 the WWC gave a literary prize, called the Amy Dawson-Scott Literary prize. This prize was given in two categories, literature written in English, won by Elspeth Sandys of New Zealand, and in Spanish, won by Nuria Blanchard. They were bestowed in an event in a very dramatic location, on the roof of Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City.

Diversity website section:

Following on the PEN Congress in Belgrade in 2011, a special section of the Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee's website Diversity was opened for writers of the PIWWC, for writers to know each other through their work. Coordinated by Marija Simokovic.

Human rights cases:

The number of women writers on whose behalf the WWC has written letters is probably in the thousands. When the committee was created, its first case was Nawal al Saadawi. The Egyptian government had just confiscated the assets of her women's NGO and banned its publication, *Noun*. Since its creation the WWC has written appeals on behalf of every case of imprisonment, threat, murder or other provocation that has come to its attention.

In the last year, the WWC has paid special attention to the case of the songwriters, poets and performers of the Russian rock group Pussy Riot. Two of its members continue to be imprisoned. The WWC now uses social media, the Our Voice Facebook page, as well traditional media, to attract attention to this case.

Chairs of the Committee:

Meredith Tax 1991-1994

Greta Rana 1994-1996

Lucina Kathmann 1996-2000

Martha Cerda 2000-2003

Judith Buckrich 2003-2009

Kadija George 2009-2011

(In 2011-2012 the Committee functioned without a chair)

Ekbal Baraka 2012-present



Ekbal Baraka
2012-present

For more information contact www.pen-international.org

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