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## NETWORK

Newsletter of the International PEN Women Writers' Committee

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### Chair's message.

Belated Season's Greetings to everyone and a fervent wish for an environmentally saner, more peaceful and caring world in 2008.

Thanks to Lucina Kathmann, Sarah Lawson and Chiara Macconi for their unwavering support throughout another great year for the IPWWC. Also to the Melbourne Centre of PEN for financial and moral assistance.

This year has been an extraordinarily busy one for the IPWWC. Since the Berlin Congress there have been three significant meetings for women writers in PEN – in Hong Kong in February, Dakar in July and Helsinki in August.

As well we have collected material for the 4<sup>th</sup> volume of the IPWWC anthology "Our Voice". Production of the volume has been slowed down due to family illness of the publisher, but we hope to see it available early in 2008.

The Dakar meetings were attended by members of the women writers' committee and many delegates from all over the world. The meetings were acknowledged by all who attended as providing a very useful forum for writers to talk about the situations they face day to day.

Although the IPWWC conference was cut from two days to one because of financial restrictions, we managed to cover a wide range of topics and to hold workshops that would enable future planning. We also held a literary evening and dinner at which many writers read from their work. I am very grateful to the women who acted as moderators for these

workshops and to the PEN office in London for facilitating the meeting. A summary of each meeting is reported in this newsletter in the English, French and Spanish, but the individual presentations will be posted on the website only in the language it was given.

### **Network staff**

Editors

Lucina Kathmann, Chiara Macconi and Judith Buckrich

Translators

Ricardo Gustavo Espeja, Mariam Karim and Lucina Kathmann

### **IPWWC Report for 2006-2007**

During 2006-2007 the IPWWC was mostly occupied with planning towards the African Women Writers Conference held in Dakar on 11 and 12 July, 2007.

Planning had begun for this event at the Bled Congress in 2005 and continued at the Berlin Congress in 2006. The Dakar IPWWC conference hosted 40+ women and included an evening of readings and a dinner. There were also 2 IPWWC sessions at the Dakar Congress. Details of these sessions are in a separate report.

The IPWWC especially welcomed African Centre IPWWCs including Egyptian PEN, Ghanaian PEN, Kenyan PEN, Malawi PEN, Nigerian PEN, Senegal PEN, Zambian PEN, Algerian PEN, Moroccan PEN and Uganda PEN.

There were also many Korean and Chinese women writers present in Dakar. Representatives of their centres gave special reports at the congress meetings.

In February 2007 Chinese, Philippine, Nepalese and Australian IPWWC members from various centres attended the Hong Kong regional PEN conference. As IPWWC Chair, I was invited to attend this conference and led two IPWWC sessions where women were able to discuss issues facing Chinese women writers and plan for further action.

Rita Dahl of the Finnish PEN Centre hosted the second Central Asian IPWWC conference in Helsinki in August 2007. Many of the women who attended the first session in Bishkek in 2005 were in Helsinki and a large number of women from other centres also attended. The IPWWC thanks Rita and Finnish PEN for organising this event.

Contributions for the 4th Volume of "Nuestra Voz, Our Voice, Notre Voix" have been sent to the publisher Biblioteca de Textos Universitarios of the Universidad Católica de Salta. There were 40 contributors.

Two issues of the IPWWC newsletter NETWORK/LE RÉSEAU/LA RED were published - in September 2006 and May 2007.

The website was updated and new contacts added. The informal contact list receiving information on IPWWC activities now has 240 names. The website will be updated again after the publication of the December 2007 issue of the newsletter.

We have been working on a survey with WiP on the treatment of women writers in prisons and in danger.

I also represented the IPWWC and led a panel on women's writing at the Sable Fest in The Gambia following the Dakar Congress. This was a very joyous occasion as I was also able to attend the wedding of Kadija George, African Writers' Abroad Centre President to Wayne Edge.

Thanks to Sarah Lawson, Lucina Kathmann, Chiara Macconi and the Melbourne Centre of PEN as well as officers and staff of International PEN, especially Joanne Leedom-Ackerman who has just retired as General Secretary of PEN, for supporting the activities of the IPWWC.



**Front row** Teresa Cadete (Portuguese centre), Sokhna Benga (Senegalese PEN), Berivan Doski (Kurdish centre), Cai Yong Mai (ICPC), Sarah Lawson (English Centre), Ekbal Baraka (Egyptian Centre), Judith Buckrich (Chair IPWWC Melbourne Centre), Justine Mintsa (Gabon PEN), Maureen Sulumba (Malawi PEN), Hala El Badryt (Egyptian PEN)

**Row just behind Rita Dahl** (Finnish PEN), Lucina Kathmann (International Vice President, San Miguel de Allende Centre), Rahmatou Seck (Senegalese Centre), Bhuwan Dhangana (Nepal Centre), Doreen Baingana (African Writers Abroad Centre AWAC), Cornelius Gulere (Ugandan Centre).

**Second row** Mariama Khan (AWAC), Koumanthio Zeinab Diallo, Chiara Macconi – head turned (Swiss Italian Centre), Toyin Adewale Gabriel (Nigerian Centre), Muthoni Likimani (Kenyan Centre), Tienchi Martin-Liao (ICPC), Regina Eya, Nigerian PEN, Dalmira Telepergenova (Bishkek Centre), Kadija George (AWAC)

**Fourth Row** Yukiko Chino (Japanese Centre), Claudia Francis (AWAC), Marie-France Conde Rey (Esperanto PEN), Elisabeth Nordgren (Finnish Centre)

**Back Row** Karen Efford (International PEN office), Elizabeth Starvcevic (San Miguel de Allende Centre), Kristin Schnider (Swiss German Centre), Eugene Schoulgin (International Secretary) Frank Mackay Anim-Appiah (Ghanaian Centre), Philo Ikonya (Kenyan PEN).

### Notes from the IPWWC meetings at the Dakar Congress

We are pleased to report that at each PEN Congress of the last four years greater numbers of women (and men) have attended the IPWWC meetings. This year we had two meetings each of four hours but still found it difficult to get through all of our agenda. Since the 2005 congress in Bled, Slovenia we have had two meetings at each congress. Until this year these meetings were of 3 hours duration. In Dakar we had two four hour meetings.

My thanks to IPWWC Secretary Sarah Lawson, who each year takes the minutes of the meetings. Thanks also to the simultaneous translators. The reports were given in French, English and Spanish.

The meetings were held on Friday 6 July 2007 and Sunday 8 July 2007 at the Le Meridien President Hotel in Dakar.

There were 50 people present at the first meeting and 40 at the second.

More than 60 women in total attended the congress meetings and the IPWWC African Women Writers' Conference which followed on the 12<sup>th</sup> at the Ngor Diorama Hotel. The women were from Senegal and Iraq, Poland, Kurdistan, Nepal, Switzerland, Korea, Antigua, Uganda, Bishkek, Brittain, Egypt, Mexico, France, Morocco, Ghana, China, USA, Gabon, Jordan, Zambia, Malawi, Bangladesh, Finland, Croatia, Portugal, Nigeria, Serbia, Japan, The Gambia and Australia.

Judith Buckrich chaired the meeting. She mentioned the Women's Conference to be held after the Congress on 11 and 12 July the Ngor Diorama Hotel.

Most of the meeting time was taken up with reports from delegates from PEN centres.

### Friday July 6

Professor Chang Nam Suh (Korean PEN) presented a visual report in which she described how *The Evergreen Tree*, a novel of the 1930s by Shim Hoon, helped to change the "antiquated agrarian Korean society". Concluding that Literature was a valuable tool for social change, then and now.

Tienchi Martin-Liao (Independent Chinese Centre) introduced two colleagues who had spent a combined total of 17 years in prison. Freedom of expression in the People's Republic of China is impossible, even for those who have only published online. There is rigorous censorship, and this has created self-censorship. More than 30 members of Independent Chinese PEN are now in jail. The president of the Centre in Beijing is under constant surveillance, and one member has been prevented from coming to this Congress. In China there are more than 30,000 internet police. The government has instituted the

“Golden Shield Project” to create the “Great Firewall of China”. Tienchi then drew our attention to specific cases.

Berivan Dosky (Kurdish Centre) talked about the improvement of situation of women in Iraqi Kurdistan. There are no women writers in prison for their writing but there are social pressures. In the Kurdistans of Syria, Turkey, and Iran the situation is much worse. Women and gender issues are important in Iran; writing about them can lead to imprisonment. It is forbidden to write in or about the Kurdish language. Merely speaking Kurdish is regarded as a crime. She mentioned that women fleeing other parts of Iraq to Kurdistan where they can live in peace and without fear. Berivan invited the women of the IPWWC to have a conference in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Zeinab Diallo (Guinean Centre) stated that in Guinea there is a Ministry for Women and that there have been scholarly studies that promote the role of women in Guinean society. But there is still a problem with men accusing women of sorcery and of intentionally having only daughters. Repudiation and violence continues to be a problem for women in Guinea.

Justine Mintsu (Gabon PEN) described the value of tradition and the need to reaffirm it, although there are positive and negative sides of it. For example, girls are required to marry very young. A woman is almost an object. The wedding arrangement consists of three stages: the presentation, the agreement on the dowry, and the final delivery of the woman to the man. She may even be “inherited” on her husband’s death! There is a wide area of tradition that must not be talked about. African women have two roles they must play: (1) with their husbands’ parents in the village and (2) with their professional colleagues at the university or elsewhere.

Amal al Jubouri (new Iraqi PEN Centre) talked about Iraq where there is a constant danger of death. Recently a woman journalist was kidnapped and raped, but her family didn’t want to pay to get her back, because they would only have to kill her in an honour killing, so why pay money for that?

Ekbal Baraka (Egyptian Centre) spoke of the strange situation in Egypt now. Medieval jurisprudence has been revived by some Islamic groups. The ideas are spread in universities among very young students. Now in Egypt older women are not veiled but younger women are! Intellectuals are divided between those who want freedom and those who are afraid that Western influence will engulf Egypt. These trends affect women, but there is freedom to write. They can’t form groups, but they can express themselves on TV and in writing. The government is not harsh or despotic. A state prize was given to a critic of the government, because it wants to appear modern and free. There is a certain freedom—“Hyde Park freedom”: that is, talk is OK, but that’s all.

### **Sunday 8 July**

We continued to hear reports on Sunday.

Toyin Adewale-Gabriel (chair of WWC, Nigerian PEN) talked about the situation in Nigeria. She said a very low percentage of Nigerian women are literate or in positions of power. Women writers tackle the problems of, for example, abuse, widows’ rights, AIDS, female

genital mutilation, etc. Nigerian women writers support each other. In 1996 Toyin and Omowunmi Segun co-edited *Breaking the Silence*, the first anthology of short stories by Nigerian women. It was dismissed by male critics as “kitchen literature”, but it became a textbook in several Nigerian universities and a strong vehicle for promoting Nigerian women’s writing. Many of the writers in the anthology have gone on to publish books and win prizes. Now women writers have tackled socio-political issues like the feminisation of poverty; patriarchy; HIV-AIDS; girls’ education; violence to women, etc. Fewer than 18% of Nigerian girls get secondary education. Less than 17% of public offices held by women. The burden of HIV-AIDS is carried by women—they are not allowed to protect themselves and must care for husbands, children, grandchildren, often when they themselves are suffering from the disease. Toyin said Nigerian women writers hold workshops for schoolchildren to challenge the perceptions of women in Nigerian literature and also to support each other’s work and provide mentoring and critical feedback. But there are major challenges. Women write in English and lack the skill to write in their mother tongues and therefore to communicate with women in villages where there is little education. Getting published is a perennial problem for all Nigerian writers.

Malija Sililo (Zambian PEN) said that over 50% of Zambians are literate, but they do not read critically. For women the oral tradition is more important. Publication is very expensive and is a hindrance to women who depend on husbands for financial support. She thought there should be reading circles and writers’ workshops. Zambia is not a reading nation, and Zambians must work to change this. There is a monthly literary magazine for women enabling them to express themselves, read, and earn some money. This group is trying to find office space; they now have temporary space with the British Council. They want to reach local writers in languages other than English.

Fouzia Rhissassi (Moroccan PEN) told the meeting that there has been a feminist press in Morocco since 1991 disseminating literature by and about women. Women writers are present in the long literary tradition of Morocco, but the Moslem tradition is always to keep sexes separate. The power of the written word was denied to Muslim women for a long time because the word was sacred to Allah. There was a strong relationship between the word and sacredness. There were some who believed that for women to write was sacrilegious; women wrote in French as a way of subverting this idea. Moroccan writers of Arabic expression avoid taboo subjects, but those of French expression tackle personal, private, and sexual matters. Moroccans are acquiring the habit of making ethical choices—and in a society where questions is not allowed. Young people grow up indoctrinated with values, not realising that there are other cultures and values. Moroccan women published an anthology of woman writers four years ago, and now there is a plan for a new anthology.

Laila Al-Atrash (Jordan) said that journalists can write anything, but not about religion. She said most women want to stay at home; they reject freedom. This includes some professional women. The problem now is the attitude of fundamentalists. Men are also victims and take it out on women. When men are free they will try to give freedom to women, too.

Sibila Petlevski (Croatian PEN) was very touched by the reports. She said that Central Europe now has a new patriarchalism. There are positive and negative aspects of it. Women writers are successful in Croatia, and the relations between the sexes are all right. There are university programmes in gender studies. But there is a hypocrisy of equality. For example,

there was a law case where a woman was sentenced to prison for not paying alimony to her abusive husband. There are male intellectual abuses that are not reported, and male MPs are condescending to female MPs in Parliament.

Bhuwan Dhangana (Nepal PEN) mentioned that there are many good writers in Nepal, but there is too much “journalism” and not enough literature! The second language is English, but there are many indigenous languages and dialects, and women’s writing is emerging in them. There is a problem with translations. Most women write in their own languages. Could PEN help with translations? Help is also needed with an anthology for use in universities. Nepalis would also like more access to the literatures of the rest of the world.

Rita Dahl (Finnish PEN) reported about their planned meeting in Helsinki, August 18-19, for Central Asian women writers. Rita did the fund-raising for it and has many sponsors for the conference. The focus will be on women and censorship in Central Asia, but there will also be people attending from Turkey, Malawi, etc. There is to be an anthology of Central Asian women writers.

Chiara Macconi (Swiss-Italian PEN) said that the problem in Switzerland is hypocrisy. Women have full rights, but there is discrimination at the professional level. There are many women writers, some literary and some not. There is the problem of individualism and private life. One must be aware of burdens and consequences of freedom. Men are not always ready to accept women’s freedom.

Lucina Kathmann (San Miguel PEN) made a brief overview of the IPWWC. Since our attendance at the Beijing Women’s Conference in 1999. As an NGO we are entitled to be observers at the UN Commission on the Status of Women. This body listens most to NGOs. We go to get our voices heard. We are not regional and that sometimes confuses people. There are 1658 representatives of NGOs. The themes each year are always something from the platform of the Beijing Conference in 1999. Self-censorship is a big problem. For example in many countries female genital mutilation is a taboo subject and it mustn’t be mentioned to outsiders on pain of severe punishment. Many traditional customs harm girls, like early marriage and the interruption of their education. Clubs and public spaces for girls are being created where they can talk to each other. The problem is that many girls are hard to find because they’re not allowed out. Services are hard to deliver. Accurate statistics are important for monitoring the status of women.

Sara Whyatt (International PEN) then brought up the recent Writers-in-Prison survey about the role of gender in attacks against writers in prison. There are few women on the WiPC case list, but the WiPC is not ignoring women. Women’s cases often excite more interest than men’s cases. Women writers in prison were asked what specific problems re arrest, trial, imprisonment, etc. were different from those of men. Women from 15 countries answered. The results were that (1) there was a big difference with trial, custody, and imprisonment, (2) in Saudi Arabia there was no respect for women; a woman couldn’t be arrested until her brother came to speak for her! (3) in Latin America women were not specifically targeted.

Karen Efford (International Programme Officer) outlined International PEN’s official brief for this period: In 2006 the Assembly of Delegates voted to devote a special effort to African centres. In Ghana in 2005 there was a conference of African centres. International

PEN asked about their problems and learned that they concerned sustainability and independence and also the funding of publications. Individual work plans were developed to help each African centre, after having identified what the needs were. There is money from UNESCO for projects—an “Innovations Fund” to try new things. The Swedish International Development Agency has also provided money. Next year the focus will be on Latin America and the following year it will be Asia and the Pacific. However, the hope is to create continuing programmes and exchanges and to avoid a focus for a period of time and then abandonment.

Judith Buckrich applauded the idea of regional conferences in Latin America and Asia and the Pacific. She then opened the floor to discussion, and Chiara Macconi, co-editor of the IPWWC *Network*, asked members to send her anything—articles, speeches, essays, etc.—for the newsletter, even things they have already written for another purpose.

The question of anthologies was raised. It was suggested that there should be an anthology of African writing so that people in Europe and the US could read what Africans themselves wrote. Kadija George, editor of *Sable* magazine, had asked African PEN centres for writing, but got no response. The message didn’t get passed on! Kadija, in fact, edits many anthologies.

Nigerian PEN felt they all needed to be in touch with each other; they needed a listserv on the internet. Judith Buckrich said she would make a list of African members to circulate. She pointed out that there is a house on Gorée Island owned by the Soros foundation. It could be used as a retreat for two weeks. There could be a meeting of African women writers there.

A serious problem in communications in Africa is the physical difficulty of movement. Internal flights in Africa are an “absolute nightmare” (Kadija).

There was after this some discussion of Rwanda where there is actually a policy of positive discrimination, and 8% of the lower house in the legislature are women. There are some Rwandan writers who want to start a Rwandan PEN centre.

Lucina Kathmann announced that volume four of the IPWWC anthology is about to come out. It is distributed online by the Small Press Distribution.

Teresa Salema (Portuguese PEN) is editing an online anthology called “Women in War” and welcomes texts of up to 2 pages denouncing violence and warfare.

Elizabeth Hassen (San Miguel PEN) said that there were four volumes of *Women Write Africa* published by the Feminist Press with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, to appear 2006-2007.

Judith Buckrich closed the meeting with a request to think about plans for the future. She thanked Joanne Leedom-Ackerman retiring International Secretary for the support she had given the IPWWC during the three years of her office.

**Dakar IPWWC Conference 11-12 July 2007.**

We began our conference with a literary evening at Le Kadjinol in the centre of Dakar. Seventeen people chose to read, providing us with a really rich beginning for the conference. The dinner was delicious and the setting glorious – a roof terrace with sculptures, a pond and seating. The dining room was under cover, but just as congenial. The readers included the mc for the night Rahmatou Seck, Maliya Sililo, Frank Mackay Anim- Appiah, Dorothea Smartt, Doreen Baingana, Toyin Adewale, Nicole Barrier, Philo Ikonya, Assiatou Cisse, Chiara Macconi, Nedda G. de Anhalt, Lucina Kathmann, Teresa Cadete, Sarah Lawson, Muthoni Likimani, Cornelius Gulere, Rita Dahl. It was wonderful to hear some of Africa's most extraordinary writers as well as many fine writers from Europe and Central America.

The conference proper took place at the Ngor Diorama Hotel which had fine views of the Dakar coast. Introductory speeches by Judith Buckrich (Chair of the Committee), Elisabeth Nordgren (PEN Board) and Lucina Kathmann (Vice-President of PEN) and Rahmatou Seck of Senegalese PEN were followed by an agenda review from Karen Efford of the PEN office.

Thematic papers were then given by Zeinab Koumanthio Diallo (Guinean PEN) on African Women Writers; the distance travelled, and Maliya Sililo (Zambia) on the Vision behind the promoting of reading and writing among women. This was followed by discussion on the current situation and the distance travelled facilitated by Toyin Adewale (Nigeria).

Two afternoon sessions covered an introduction to the International PEN three year plan for Africa given by Frank Geary and Karen Efford of the PEN office, presentations by Sokhna Bengha of Senegal PEN on Creating the next generation of women writers and Ekbal Baraka of Egypt PEN on the role of the IPWWC in Africa. This was followed by a discussion on the role of the IPWWC in the African Regional Plan.

The last session on Women Writers Committee in Africa: Literature as a tool for social change was facilitated by Maureen Sulumba of Malawi PEN.

The group then split into workshop groups for an hour to discuss WWC and membership, WWC and activities and WWC and structures.

Plans for future action in Africa had been discussed previously after IPWWC congress and included ideas for regional workshops, anthologies, blogs and further meetings. Regional representatives were chosen to follow these ideas.

Copies of some reports and notes from the workshops will be available in their original languages on the IPWWC website.



**Left upper corner:** Vera Iversen

**Back row:** Ekbal Baraka, Zarine Dhandosova, Lilia Kalas, Denis Nazarenko

**Middle row:** Tiina Pystynen, Aida Egemberdieva, Elisabeth Nordgren, Veronica Maele, Sarah Lawson, Dalmira Tilebergenova, Kristin T. Schnider

**First row:** Hala El-Badry, Oksana T'helyseva, Goulbara Tolomu'ova, Bubu Tokojeva, Topschugul Shaidullaeva

### Central Asian Women Conference

By Federica Prina, Senior Programme Officer in the Eurasia Programme of ARTICLE 19

On 18 and 19 August 2007 Finnish PEN held in Helsinki a conference for Central Asian Women Writers. The conference examined the hindrances to freedom of expression, particularly through literature, for women in Central Asia, including by drawing comparisons with other parts of the world, such as Finland, Egypt, Malawi and China.

Although some issues impairing freedom of expression in many countries are common to both women and men (repressive political systems, dire economic conditions), others are specific to women. Moreover, although women's right to freedom of expression is more seriously undermined in some countries than in others, gender biases in the media seem to be common everywhere. A study called 'Screening Gender' was presented, showing that, even in Finland, where women enjoy considerable representation in politics, only 20% of the experts and 28% of politicians shown on television are women. Biases were also evidenced in a well-respected BBC news programme.

At the other end of the spectrum are Central Asian women writers, who are frequently unable to express themselves in writing. Factors include: fewer educational opportunities available to women, the responsibility of looking after the home and childcare,

lack of financial independence and, in some cases, domestic violence and bride kidnapping. Women who write are also socially ostracised and, as a speaker from Kyrgyzstan noted, there have been extreme cases in which they have been killed for their work. A fear of condemnation in a heavily patriarchal society typically results in a ‘wall of silence’: not only do women face obstacles in expressing themselves in literary and artistic forms, but they are also routinely hindered in voicing their concerns. Despite the odds, women in Central Asia have contributed to the richness of their literature. There have been and there are courageous women writers, poets and journalists who have depicted their experiences and those of other women. However, much still needs to be achieved: one of the participants noted that in Central Asia women writers have always been known as somebody (a man)’s ‘wife’, ‘mother’, or ‘daughter’, rather than an individual and writer in her own right. Many women have had to hide the fact that they wrote, or had to censor themselves. Concerns about reactions from family and wider society often prevented them from addressing any subject considered ‘taboo’ – those that would label the woman author ‘vulgar’. Self-censorship does not seem to operate in the same fashion for men, who are traditionally given more scope in the choice of subjects. The overall result, the conference suggested, is that the needs, feelings and points of view of women remain largely unexpressed in Central Asia. Issues such as bride kidnapping remain almost totally outside the public domain – with stereotypes being continuously reinforced.

The conference brought together a number of women committed to breaking this vicious circle. A number of organisations are preparing projects and awareness-raising activities to assist women in expressing themselves. Among these, ARTICLE 19 is developing a programme in Central Asia, incorporating women’s freedom of expression and information rights. The conference provided an excellent opportunity for like-minded and committed women to expand their pool of contacts for a more concerted effort in bringing about positive change in the region.

### **Central Asian Women’s Conference Helsinki, 18-19 August 2007**

by Sarah Lawson, Secretary IPWWC

The Conference was a very rewarding experience on many levels. Helsinki was warm and sunny in a last fling of the summer; the city was delightful and full of both strolling tourists and Finns enjoying this Nordic capital and its fine architecture and parks. Our conference was small enough to be convivial and inclusive in spite of the language barrier so ably breached by our translator, Denis Nazarenko. Rita Dahl and the team from the Finnish PEN Women’s Committee had skilfully organised this very rich and concentrated conference, at which about 30 of us met in the Caisa Cultural Centre and listened to panel discussions moderated by Elisabeth Nordgren. We were of 10 or 12 different nationalities; some could take freedom of speech for granted and some felt constrained in many personal, social, cultural, and legal ways. Our discussions were varied with two short films directed by Dalmira Tilepbergenova, poetry and short stories by the participants, and some

funny-awful examples of media sexism in modern Europe. Finally we had a memorable farewell dinner at Zetor among the tractors and farm implements of this theme restaurant in central Helsinki.

The contrast between Finland and Central Asia was stark. We heard how Finnish women had had the vote since 1906 and women had sat in Parliament from about that time. Finland had the first woman minister of defence, and women had held every cabinet post (60% of the present cabinet were women) and there was even a woman president of the country, elected in 1999 and re-elected in 2006.

But then we heard about the situation of women in Central Asia, where the Muslim culture decrees that women shall live under many kinds of legal and social disabilities. There are rapid changes now in these post-Soviet times. The new market-led publishing has resulted in detective stories and such entertainment, but they are important first steps. The specific problems of a woman writer include “economic censorship”, as she usually cannot afford to publish her work herself, and the still worse censorship she experiences in the face of social pressures and the opinions of her husband and her family. To develop, writers need a cultural exchange with other countries, but this doesn’t happen in Kyrgyzstan, partly due to the rarity of computers.

Topchugul Shaidullaeva, a writer and sociologist, pointed out that the masculine view was always dominant. Even a creative woman was always known as the wife or daughter of somebody. In the society of Kyrgyzstan this patriarchal attitude meant that any praise for a wife by the outside world is seen by her husband as a personal insult! The creative writers of Kyrgyzstan were very lonely and isolated, more so since the fall of the Soviet Union. In addition, as women’s writing is so undervalued, there is no academic attention, and therefore no critique or assessment, so it does not develop.

Bubu Tokoeva a writer and editor, told us that women in Kyrgyzstan have been important in establishing the Kyrgyz identity. Kyrgyz are traditionally a nomadic people, and women sing to their children. Researchers have been surprised at so much singing! It is “folklore” but the transmission has depended on women. During the Soviet period, Kyrgyz literature made progress; women got more education and had access to public life, but it is difficult for women to break the old habits. However, writers are considered prophets and literary progress never stopped in Kyrgyzstan.

In contrast, Hala el-Badry told us about the situation in Egypt. After the 1968 defeat by Israel, there was censorship in Egypt. The censor sat in the newspaper office and read everything before it was printed. Sadat ended this censorship, but the job was merely taken over by the editor-in-chief. Now there is officially no censorship, but there are censors in each publishing house, and increased religious pressure is having an effect on reading committees. Religious authorities issue fatwas to confiscate books.

In Turkey, said Muge Iplikci-Cakir, article 301 of the Penal Code criminalizes insulting the state, the judiciary, the military, and “Turkishness”. Hrant Dink and Orhan Pamuk were both charged under this law.

Bahtinisa Abdurehim, an Uighur now living in Stockholm, described the situation in Turkestan, which is known as Xinjiang („new frontier%”) in China, where Uighurs and other minorities live. In spite of strong censorship exercised by the Chinese government, Uighur women are now writing, and since the end of the Cultural Revolution they have been able to write about their experiences.

Lilia Kalas, a writer and editor from Kazakhstan, surprised us with the news of 86 publishing houses in Almaty, the former capital of Kazakhstan, but nearly a quarter specialise in educational material and dictionaries. Serious literature is self-published or sponsored and subsidised. There was a Soros programme (now ended) enabling 200 books to be published. Women writers find it harder to self-publish, and when they do, the bookshops don't always want to sell their books. Nevertheless, Kazakh women win awards, but for writing in Russian rather than in other Kazakh languages (there are 120 minorities).

We heard about the Global Media Monitoring Project. The news reports of 100 countries on one day are all analysed. More about this can be found at [www.whomakesthenews.org](http://www.whomakesthenews.org) Two German political interviews were like a comedy sketch: Gerhard Schroeder was interviewed about serious political matters and Angela Merkel (not yet Chancellor) was asked frivolous questions.

Veronica Maele of Malawi gave an interesting African perspective. In spite of many obstacles, women writers are gradually making themselves heard. A major problem is lack of educational opportunities and libraries.

Vera Iversen (formerly Tokombaeva) described censorship in Kyrgyzstan as more subtle than it had been under Communism. The media is a state monopoly; political debates are scripted; the papers are full of either propaganda or trash. Journalists who might have led an opposition movement are appointed to be ambassadors abroad! Although free education is guaranteed in the constitution, there is less education now than formerly, and youths congregate in the streets. There is so little connection to the internet that the government doesn't need laws against it. (But Lilia remarks that oil-rich Kazakhstan has free internet access and people may have several computers. The sites are not restricted, but the government can shut down certain blogs or websites.)

Tiina Pystynen (Finnish PEN) tells us that world-wide at least 60 women writers are under attack for the right to self-expression. There are fewer women on the WiPC case list, but women face repression, nonetheless. Poverty and language barriers are serious problems. This conference, for example, is the first time a Uighur woman has attended an international conference.

Federica Prina (UK, Article 19) said that her organisation was founded 20 years ago the name comes from the article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At the moment they are developing a programme for Central Asia. The general problems for both men and women include the fact that there is too much centralised power, which means government ownership of printing and control of press and websites.

For those who stayed on beyond the weekend, on Monday there was a fascinating meeting with people at the Finnish Literary Society and FILI, the organisation that works to get Finnish literature better known abroad. Our Egyptian colleagues, Hala el-Badry and Ekbal Baraka, gave an enlightening and amusing talk (or two talks, but sometimes the banter made it seem like one) at a library about their experiences as journalists and writers in Egypt.

Ekbal has written a book, *The Veil*, explaining why the notion of Muslim women, s having to cover themselves with various headscarves, veils, burkas, and so on is something taken from ancient Assyria and Persia and has no real relevance to Islam. “It’s history, it belongs to the past!” She has debated with imams on Egyptian television and got them to admit that the veil is mentioned in the Koran precisely once, and then is a very particular context.

Hala has written daring novels and has covered the Iraq war as a journalist. “There is a very strange society in Egypt!” she remarked. “Sometimes you can write anything, but at other times some small infraction gets you thrown in prison.”

Many of the contributions in this conference appear in *The Insatiable Furnace*, edited by Rita Dahl. The book contains articles in Finnish and English, but enough is in English to make it well worthwhile even for someone who reads only English.



### **Doris Lessing Receives Nobel Prize**

The IPWWC congratulates Doris Lessing on winning the 2007 Nobel Prize for Literature. She is only the 11th woman to have won the prize since it started in 1901.

In a career that has spanned more than 50 years, she has written 25 novels, short stories, plays, autobiography, poetry and opera.

The Nobel academy said it "belongs to the handful of books that informed the 20th-century view of the male-female relationship".

The Nobel citation described her as "that epicist of the female experience, who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilisation to scrutiny".

Lessing was an enormous influence in the English speaking world during the 1970s feminist revolution and her work empowered thousands of women.

The prize is overdue but we are delighted that it was finally awarded.

### **Event Honors Peruvian Woman Writer**

The women writers committee of Peruvian PEN and the Spanish Cultural Center presented an event in homage to the poet Carmen Luz Bejarano on October 15, 2007 in the Auditorium of the Spanish Cultural Center. Rocio Castro Morgado and Marita Troiano discussed the life and work of Carmen Luz Bejarano, Elena Pasapera read from her poetry including some unpublished works, and May Rivas moderated the event. This is the fourth in Peruvian PEN's ongoing cycle of lectures about Peruvian women writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Cuban Writers in Exile member Mercedes Cortazar** has had her first short story written in English published by Arabesques. You can find the story and information about Mercedes if you follow this internet link:

<http://www.arabesquespress.org/journal/taxonomy/term/429/9>

IPWWC congratulates Mercedes.

**An Abridged Report on the Situation of Women Writers and Journalists in the Islamic Regime in Iran. Prepared by the Women's Committee of the Iranian PEN Centre in Exile(IPCE)**

This report refers to cases during the past calendar year which has been gleaned from accounts of Iranian Human Rights activists in Europe and North America as well as other specified Media. It can not be a comprehensive account due to severe censorship imposed by the Islamic regime on all media.

As well as the existence of draconian laws and restrictions in the body politic of the country. The statistics relating to the Persian year 1386(2006-7) reveal that 7 journalists are still in prison, more than 4 daily newspapers and 20 weekly journals have been debarred and tens of writers and press people and editors have been arrested and dragged to courts. Amongst these there have been numerous women journalists and internet bloggers.

Iranian writers and publishers, particularly women live in constant fear of censorship, of cancellation of permits to print, threats of arrest, court procedures, torture and sometimes even death.

The ruling oligarchy in Iran employs every device to throttle those who use their pen to inform and to enlighten and in this way keep its sway over a society deprived from the true state of affairs.

In this report we have to confine ourselves only to giving an account of the difficulties, trials and tribulations directed against women:

1. Ms Soraya AZIZ-PANAH editor of Rasan Journal has been dragged to court in Marivan town accused of spreading lies about the Islamic regime and sedition(Isna News)
2. Ms Leila MADANI editor of the weekly journal Krefto was arrested and interrogated in Sannandaj Town in response to complaints lodged by the Kurdish Science Faculty. She was later released on bail of 3 million Toomans (Ilna News)
3. The Newspaper Roozegar edited by Ms Farzaneh KHARGHANI was suspended from publication after 5 editions on the order of Press Censors (Isna)
4. Ms Mahnaz MAZAHERI editor of Journal "Water Lotus" was arraigned in the criminal court of Teheran accused of " uttering Falsehood"
5. Ms Adam MOLASAEEDI editor of HADAF, was accused of publishing untruth, libellous accounts and interrogated(Ilna)
6. Ms Parvaneh FORGHANI editor of "World of Economics)accused of spreading falsehood by Sepah Bank was arraigned (Ilna)
7. Ms Roya TOLOOI, Chief Editor of Journal RASAN already suspended was tried "in absentia" in Sannandaj Town accused of sedition.

8. Ms Fatima AHMADSARAI editor of "New Society" already countermanded was hauled up before the criminal court of Teheran accused of slandering religious tenets, spreading prostitution and printing matters contrary to public morality (Ilna)
9. Salaleh SADRAI editor of Donya(The world) accused of libellous use of people's pictures was hauled up before Judge Saremi in the criminal court of Teheran and penalized with a large sum
10. Ms Elham FORUTAN on the editorial board of the suspended journal Tammadon Hormozgan was charged with spreading matters contrary to public morals and was convicted to pay a large penalty, a year in prison, 5 years suspension of civil rights and blacklisted as a journalist
11. Ms Zahra AMIRI, editor of a cinematic journal was tried in the criminal court of Teheran accused by the prosecutor fiscal of the regime of using movie pictures in the service of slander. (Ilna).
12. Ms Shokuh JIROODI Editor of Naghsh Afarinan, was arraigned accused of spreading prostitution and sinful pictures (Ilna)
13. Ms Najmeh OMIDPARVAR Web log editor was charged with defaming the former President Khatami and opposition to the regime was penalised, kept incommunicado for 25 days and had her goods confiscated by bailiffs.
14. Ms Saghi BAGHERI-NIA editor in chief of "Asiia" was accused of printing opposition materials was hauled up by the prosecutor to the criminal court in Teheran, and condemned to 6 months prison.
15. A translation of the book by Alain de Baton called "On the Art of Travelling" has been awaiting publication for the past seven months awaiting the permit from the Ministry of Islamic Culture. Ms Lily Golestan the translator stated that numerous writers are in a queue to get a permit for publication. Many books which had been previously published have had their permit revoked. When a permit is revoked 25 years after the first edition of a book it shows what we are up against.
16. The permit to print an anthology of poems from Forough Farrokhzad "If Love was true Love" written by Ms Ilia DIANUSH has been suspended by the Ministry of Islamic Culture (Ilna)
17. Ms Roya PIRZAD has had her book "I Will Douse the Lights" banned from publication by the Ministry. This book had seen 23 editions in the past 5 years.
18. Ms GOLI EMAMI has been told that her translation of the novel "A Girl With Pearl Earrings" by Tracy Chevalier previously seen 4 editions has now been subject to revocation (Isna)

19. The Internet Site "Women's Battleground" has been subjected to "Filtration" at a time when two persons already condemned to be stoned to death - a woman by the name of Hajieh Esmaeelvand , Parisa Alef another woman and her husband Najaf have had their case referred to a court of appeal

20. The Internet Site "A Campaign to change discriminatory Laws by a Million Signatures" has been "filtered" on order of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance and the Ministry of Information. This Campaign had been initiated by a committee of women activists in Iran.

21. Ms Zohreh VAFAI publishing editor of "Zinat Pasha" and editor of Javaldooz, a satirical journal was arrested by agents of the Information Ministry. Elsewhere in Moghan Town Eivaz TAHAPOOR editor of literary Magazine Yarpagh was arrested and detained (Committee for the Defence of Political Prisoners-Azerbaijan Section).

22. The periodical NAMEH edited by Keyvan SAMIMI after printing a poem by Simin BEHBEHANI has been debarred after a run of 53 editions by order of Press Censors

23. Zemestan(Winter) a student journal edited by Ms Niloofar BAGHBAN has been confiscated after publishing an article entitled "To Break the big Idol" This was on order from the Committee to Supervise Student Publications under the charge of sacrilege.

24. Ms Lila POOR-YUSEFI chief Editor of Sobh Zendegi(The Dawn of Life) was arraigned in the Criminal Court of Teheran accused of printing " porno " pictures.

25. Ms Manijeh ZIBAI Editor of Pearl of Liberty was accused of printing anti Islamic material and fined 200000 toomans

26. The Encyclopaedia "Women from Stone Age to Historical Times" in two volumes has been denied permit of publication

27. Ms Fariba DAVARI head of the Women's Committee of Literati in the Islamic Iran who is also a secretary of the Young Journalists was hauled up before the Revolutionary Court in Teheran charged with participating in Demonstrations by women. She was released on bail of 15 million Toomans(1lna)

28. Ms Parvin ARDALAN and Ms Nushin AHMADI Khorasani activists in women's organizations were hauled up before the Revolutionary Court in Teheran charged amongst other things with sedition. They were later released on bail of 15 million Toomans

29. Ms Jila BANI-YAGHOOB Chief Editor of the Site "Iranian Women's Kanoon and a columnist on the newspaper "Capital" was arraigned by the revolutionary Court in Teheran

30. Ms Sheerin EBADI, the Nobel Laureate who is a member of the Human Rights Committee in Iran stated that she had received a long letter listing herself and many others from a compendium of 3470 activists who are deemed to be deserving of Islamic slaughter. She said that she knew that it was pointless to complain to Authorities to pursue the authors of this black list.

31. Ms Mehrnush SOLUKI, an ethnic Iranian with French Nationality who is a student of journalism and had come to visit her parents in Iran was arrested by agents of the Ministry of Information although the materials she had gathered on the subject of Iran-Iraq War had received a permit for publication. All her materials and films and documents found at her fathers house were confiscated. She was kept for a month at Evin Prison and later released on bail of 100 million Toomans. Since then she has been repeatedly hauled up and interrogated by security agencies of the Regime.

32. Ms Parnaz AZIMA an investigative Journalist with American passport was arrested on arrival in Teheran in February . All her documents were grabbed and confiscated and has been repeatedly interrogated. She had come to Iran to visit her sick mother. She has not received back her travel documents and passport after four months of repeated visit to judicial authorities. She is pressurised to "cooperate with the Authorities.

33. The Iranian Cannon of Writers has had its internet site debarred and all its communications through this site has been lost.

### **Regional PEN**

From a report by Mohamed Magani of Algerian PEN, member of the International Board of PEN

In December 2005, at a meeting in Accra, Ghana, work started on the first-ever three year PEN regional development program. This program, ratified by the PEN World Congress in Berlin in 2006, hopes to strengthen the work of International PEN throughout a whole region, rather than a single nation or linguistic group.

The Africa priority region program aims for greater visibility and effectiveness of International PEN, its international standing committees, and the African PEN centers and their regional organization, PAN, by means of literary and artistic involvement.

Some of the goals are: to expand freedom of expression in Africa, to promote translation and publishing of African literature, to set up youth writing clubs, to establish literary prizes and to create writers residencies where possible.

International PEN and African PEN centers will encourage reactivation of dormant PEN centers, the establishment of new PEN centers and will promote development plans so that active PEN centers can become better known and more self-sufficient.

The regional African PEN organization PAN met with International PEN representatives in Accra in 2005, in Dakar in 2006, in Nairobi in 2007 and in Rabat in 2007. Some ideas that were discussed were: seeking a seat for PEN at the African Union (NEPAD), strengthening the role of PAN and breaking down linguistic and regional barriers to promote equal participation of non-English language centers.

According to the Regional Plan, as developed by the African PEN Centers with Frank Geary and Karen Efford of the International Team, each center has a plan to move forward in one of the following areas, depending on the needs of each center:

- constitution and governance
- membership
- programs
- planning and fundraising
- communication

Small grants have been made available through the Innovations Fund, with the support of UNESCO, and a Program Fund, with the support of SIDA.

A three-year International PEN development program for Latin America and the Caribbean is scheduled to start in 2008.

### **Something Fascinating in the State of Denmark**

By Lucina Kathmann

What is really going on in Hamlet? We have seen the aspects Shakespeare presented of the situation in Elsinore many times. But has anyone wondered why Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, married her brother-in-law immediately after the death of her beloved husband? Have they wondered whether Polonius had a wife and what she thought?

Sarah Lawson, longtime secretary of the IPWWC, wondered about these things to the point that she wrote the other side of the matter, *Gertrude, Queen of Denmark*, a play which takes place in the time frame just after Shakespeare's *Hamlet* begins until just before the bloodbath at the end of it.

In Lawson's account, Gertrude, with the good counsel of Polonius' wife, has been running Denmark, and she proposes to keep on doing so. Her son Hamlet has returned from his studies so upset about his father's death that he cannot even hear about the *realpolitik* going on in the court. It's a pity, his mother thinks; he really needs to understand these things if he is one day to become the great king his father was.

Gertrude's understanding of their situation also proves inadequate for the horrible bloodbath about to take place in Elsinore, but *Gertrude, Queen of Denmark* makes sense of many matters which Shakespeare scholars have never even attempted before.

Lawson's play was produced at Lion and Unicorn Theater in Kentish Town, London, and ran every night from October 2-21. It is funny and serious by turns. This reviewer flew from Chicago to London for the express purpose of seeing the show, and she was not disappointed.



Sarah Lawson and Lucina Kathmann on the set of *Gertrude, Queen of Denmark*