



8th Writers in Prison Committee Conference Oslo, Norway 1-2 June 2009

Summary Report

The 8th Writers in Prison Committee (WiPC) Conference was held 1-2 June, prior to the 3-day Global Forum for Free Expression, hosted by Fritt Ord and Norwegian PEN, and the International Freedom of Expression Exchange. This was an extraordinarily ambitious programme with over 500 guests and participants, and such a wide number of panels and events. This made for the bringing together of an unprecedented number of delegates, and a wonderful opportunity to make connections and learn.

A total of 70 PEN members, staff and guests attended the two day event and many stayed on for the Forum. The holding of the WiPC conference within the GFFE enabled higher than usual participation of Centres from countries that often cannot participate, such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Colombia, Kenya, Venezuela, Russia. This was thanks to the generosity of the Norwegian Publisher's Association as well as to support provided by Fritt Ord to allow individuals to attend.

Testimonies

Generous support of the Norwegian Publishers Association and subsidies from the GFFE itself enabled us to invite speakers who were attending the Forum to speak to our meeting. Participants were able to hear presentations and meet with writers with direct experience of repression. These included Lydia Cacho from Mexico, Jiang Weiping and Gloria Fung from China, Sihem Bensedrine from Tunisia, Chi Dang from Vietnam and Samay Hamed from Afghanistan. Their presence served to underline the importance of PEN advocacy in providing support to writers and journalists living under pressure, and to provide an impetus to PEN members for increased and greater action.

PEN Centres Under Pressure

Delegates from **Ethiopia, Somalia, Russia, Kenya, China** (including the **Uyghur** and **Tibetan** communities), **Colombia, Venezuela** and **Turkey** gave testimony on the legal and physical threats that they face in their promotion of free expression. This resulted in the recommendation that Centres in countries that do not face such difficulties should form support networks around those that do.

Centre Activities

All delegates were given the opportunity to share with other Centres their activities, many of which were inspirational. Among them were the campaign by the **American** PEN Centre against anti-terror and other legislation that has an impact on the right to information in the USA. The **Basque** PEN Centre, which has members detained in Spain for their commentary on Basque independence, spoke of their work for Iranian writers from minority groups. **English** PEN's visit to writers under oppression in Azerbaijan was a source of great support and provided greater insight into the situation there.

Like PEN America, it places high importance on working on free expression issues in its own country, and was instrumental in achieving the abolition of defamation from UK law. A high profile campaign in **Sweden** in support of a detained Eritrean writer led to over 200,000 signatures on a petition. Centres were encouraged to join Swedish PEN in their efforts. **Danish** PEN similarly had great success in its celebrations marking the 15 November Day of the Imprisoned Writer where 100s of signatures were collected and postcards sent on behalf of detained writers, while leading writers made presentations at the Copenhagen Book Fair. **Catalan** PEN equally has a long standing and well developed program of literary events on free expression, exile and linguistic rights producing excellent and attractive materials. **Belgian Flemish** PEN has an excellent program of panel debates and readings around the issue of free expression that they hold year-round. **Norwegian** PEN has been a mainstay of WiPC activities, specifically in developing PEN's exile program, working in collaboration with IFEX and other organisations, including visits to countries such as Tunisia and Afghanistan. PEN **Turkey** is specifically interested in the problems of suppression in the name of religion, and has a particular concern for writers in neighbouring countries, working with the **Uighur** PEN Centre in a project linking Central Asian writers. The **Swiss Romande** Centre is based in Geneva which makes it perfectly placed to monitor the UN Council on behalf of and in consultation with the PEN office in London.

Campaigns

The WiPC conference is also the venue where previous campaigns are evaluated and plans made for the future.

- **China** was a theme for 2008/09 using the Olympic Games as a focus. A major success was the imaginative use of the internet through the Poem Relay project as an advocacy tool to promote literature and translation, as well as the global network of writers. Learning from this, the WiPC conference agreed that this idea can be adapted for PEN's work on other projects.
- **Freedom of Expression in the Americas** is the current focus for 2009 and which was commended for its use of the web as a campaign tool. The meeting explored ways of developing the China action success into the Americas campaign. Lydia Cacho's powerful presentation on Mexico, as well as expert testimony from the Colombian and Venezuelan PEN Centres, served to illustrate the issues facing writers in those countries. The conference gave the opportunity for representatives from around a dozen PEN Centres to spend time in a working group evaluating the campaign so far and to plan for the rest of the year.
- **"Religious Defamation"** is a running focus of PEN's activities, with the PEN HQ monitoring developments in the UN and the European Union. PEN's WiPC Programme Director gave an outline of its work so far, the problems faced by the Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, and overview of attempts to stifle free speech relating to religion.
- **2010 - Fifty Years of WiPC:** the meeting noted that 2010 will be the 50th year since the establishment of the WiPC within International PEN and it was agreed that throughout the year PEN will mark this important anniversary. It will be an opportunity to look back at developments over the past half century, to celebrate and to identify key cases from each era that represented the struggle for free expression over the years. Public events featuring writers who had benefited from WiPC attention or who have experienced WiPC advocacy are planned, including at PEN's international literary festivals.

- Also discussed were the publication of writings and testimonies on line and possibly in print. A working group at the Conference provided ideas and initiatives for the event. Goals for this celebratory year, activities and timelines will be presented to the next PEN Congress.

Exile work

The Conference provided an opportunity for discussion on how to develop PEN's work for exiled writers. Increasingly Centres are working alongside the International Cities of Refuge Network, and some of the PEN Writers in Exile Network energy has been transferred to joint activities with ICORN. It was agreed that there would be a final review of the Network at the next PEN congress and that the collaboration with ICORN should be enhanced.

Governance

The issue of raising financial support for the PEN's WiPC during the current financial crisis was raised alongside an introduction to 3-year plan (2010-2012) for International PEN as an organisation that is currently being drafted. The PEN Emergency Fund's work was discussed and there was also a presentation by and vote on the candidacy for the WiPC Chair to take office at close of the PEN Congress in Linz in October.

Global Forum For Free Expression and PEN

The WiPC's hosting of a panel discussion on **prison testimonies** with Sami el Hajj, former Guantanamo detainee, and Jack Mapanje, Malawi writer, was extremely successful, providing an opportunity for participants to hear first hand of accounts of imprisonment, and also to hear powerful and moving poetry written from prison. There was very positive feedback on this session.

Although the working groups on the **Universal Periodic Review**, co-hosted with HRH, were small and for persons with a specialist interest, they were a very useful means of clarifying ideas and to explain this complex purpose and which will guide future activities.

One of the most moving and lively debates at the GFFE was on **silenced women's voices** where PEN Kenya President Philo Ikonya and honorary member Lydia Cacho of Mexico, discussed the marginalisation of women in the media alongside Afghan political, Malalai Joya and writer Irshad Manji.

Full minutes of the 8th International WiPC Conference meeting are available to PEN members on request from Sara Whyatt, Programme Director, WiPC
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For more on the Global Forum on Free Expression, including details of the panel debates mentioned above go to <http://expressionforum.org/>