



Asia-Pacific Regional Conference of the IAWJ

Tagaytay, The Philippines
12-15 May 2015

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The Asia-Pacific regional conference was held from 12 to 15 May in the beautiful mountain town of Tagaytay, about an hour from Manila. The Philippines Women Judges Association (PWJA) had very kindly arranged to pick up all delegates. So we were all met at the airport off our various flights, whisked through Customs and driven up to the conference hotel in comfort. We all felt very special and the wonderful hospitality of our President, Justice Teresita Leonardo de Castro, and her fantastic PWJA team continued right through the whole conference.

On the first evening there was a welcome dinner and cultural night, where we were treated to dances by the judges from all regions of the Philippines. The costumes were elaborate, the dancing superb (we had to keep reminding ourselves these were judges and not professional dancers) and showed the variety, colour and vibrancy of the Philippines.

The evening was also memorable for a moving video tribute to our much loved and respected outgoing executive director, Joan Winship, arranged and fronted by our President, Teresita. Joan was then serenaded by a professional singer, who presented her with an enormous bunch of flowers. Joan, while no doubt a bit embarrassed by all the attention focused on her, carried it all off with her usual calm elegance.

The professional singer was then joined by the “diva of the Supreme Court” (administrator by day and singer by night) for a medley of songs from opera to Broadway. This was followed by an award ceremony for those with the best national dress. Truly an evening to treasure.

The conference proper started the next day with a very impressive opening ceremony, complete with the trooping of the colour and the Philippine Supreme Court prayer and hymn. Our President then gave the Opening Remarks to highlight the theme of the conference “Protecting the Rights of Women and Children Across the Asia Pacific Region” and to provide a formal start to the proceedings. We then heard a speech given on behalf of the Chief Justice of the Philippines, the Hon Maria Lourdes P.A. Sereno (she was unfortunately prevented from attending through illness but her speech was presented by Justice Estela M Perlas-Bernabe), an inspiring address by the Hon Grace Poe, Philippines senator and adopted

daughter of a famous filmmaker who had unsuccessfully run for President and were updated on the programmes and other activities of the IAWJ by Joan Winship.

The business sessions that followed were in accordance with the conference theme. The first session on the afternoon of the first day was on trafficking and we heard from Maria Rowena Modesto-San Pedro from the Philippines, Vicki Wei-Ya Wu from Chinese Taipei and Binta Nyako from Nigeria. We heard that, while worldwide trafficking for sexual purposes accounts for the major percentage of trafficking cases, in South East Asia almost half of the cases are forced labour trafficking. We also heard about the difficulties in prosecuting trafficking cases, including difficulties in investigation offshore and the reluctance of victims to testify through fear or economic incentives. We were also told that tragically the 200 victims of Boko Haram recently rescued are all pregnant, with the obvious implications, both personal and societal, that will cause.

The next session that afternoon dealt with domestic violence. Speakers were Elisa Sarmiento-Flores from the Philippines, Gita Mittal from India, Susan Glazebrook from New Zealand and Charlotte Kelly from Australia. The importance of access to justice in the widest sense was stressed by the speakers, as well as the need to ensure the safety of victims by assessing risk properly, not ignoring warning signs, having access to treatment for offenders and making sure that the court processes are conducive to delivering justice for victims and to their safety. The afternoon sessions were moderated by Ana Teresa T. Cornejo-Tomacruz from the Philippines.

The following day the morning sessions were moderated by Ma. Lynna Pacamaian Adviento, starting with a session on restorative justice. We heard from Angelene Mary Quimpo-Sale from the Philippines, Petra Newton from Canada and Robyn Tupman from Australia. Themes that arose were the need to ensure that restorative justice programmes are available for young people in order to meet international human rights obligations, the necessity for restorative justice programmes to involve the offender and to be victim focused, the value of programmes that match the offenders' culture (in the case of indigenous offenders) and the controversy over restorative justice initiatives in domestic violence cases.

The next morning session was on cybercrime on women and children. The speakers were Zenaida Galapate-Laguilles from the Philippines and Consuela Marshall from the USA. One issue here is the clash between freedom of expression and protection from harm. We heard about where the line has been drawn in the Philippines and the measures taken to find and prosecute cybercrime and the difficulties faced in this endeavour. We also heard from both speakers about concurrent prosecutions both offshore and in the home jurisdiction and the circumstances in which these might be appropriate.

The final session of the morning was on cross border child custody issues. The speakers were Ma. Theresa M Arcega from the Philippines, Valerie Thean from Singapore and Joan Charles from Trinidad and Tobago. The main theme was on the value of cooperation between judges from different jurisdictions and how this might be achieved without compromising judicial independence. The possibility of cross border mediation was mooted by the judge from Singapore. Joan Charles gave an interesting example of how cooperation between judges from her jurisdiction and New York had led to a solution in a child abduction case, even though Trinidad and Tobago are not party to the Hague Convention on child abduction.

In the afternoon the PWJA had their annual general meeting, while foreign delegates were treated to a tour. This started with the Philippine Judicial Training Academy, a very impressive residential facility, with a fully equipped mock court, a computer lab and a number of lecture theatres and break out rooms, some equipped with audio conferencing facilities to have speakers who cannot attend in person. The facility trains both judges and judicial staff and aims to be the regional training institution for the Asia-Pacific region by 2025.

The tour was not all work, however. We also visited the Museo Orlina, a beautiful glass museum of one of the foremost contemporary glass artists, and Puzzle Mansion, a museum of the largest collection of jigsaws in the world.

That evening for the gala dinner, there were more dancing exhibitions, more singing and a very enjoyable free for all dancing session in true Philippine tradition. And to top it all off the following day, there was a tour to Taal to see the Basilica of Saint Martin de Tours, with morning tea of local delicacies at the Municipal Town Hall, a visit to the Casa Dela Rosa, a beautifully restored very old stone house, and to the markets. It should also be mentioned that Teresita and her team had ensured that everyone's shopping instincts (including for pearls) could be given full reign in a bazaar they had organised at the conference hotel that ran through our the conference. There was also a very successful silent auction, the proceeds going to the IAWJ.

Thanks must go to Teresita and her dedicated team from the PWJA for a wonderful conference: stunning venue, great organisation, fantastic hosts, impressive sessions and, in true Philippine tradition, fun.