

The BPW Asia Pacific Regional Conference, Seoul, Korea, 13-15 May, 2007

The Conference was held in the Prima Hotel, Seoul and was attended by representatives of 11 of the 22 Asia Pacific countries. Delegates came from Korea, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, Singapore, Thailand, Nepal, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, Hon Kong and Philippines. Representatives from BPW International included President Dr. Nok Viravan and Vice President Liz Benham. There were also some visitors from BPW New York, in support of Liz.

BPW Seoul were most generous hosts and everything was very well organised. The program began on Sunday with a day of sightseeing organised by BPW Seoul, in which we were joined by Young BPW members who had been meeting over the previous 2 days. The tour was followed by a formal Grand Reception and Awards Presentation at the Grand Intercontinental Hotel, hosted by the Mayor of Seoul, Mr. Oh Se-Hoon. We were welcomed by BPW International President Chonchanok Viravan, and the President of BPW Korea Dr. Hyang Sook Kim.

BPW Korea's Gold Award was presented to Mr. Yoon Soek-Keum, Chair of Woongin Group. The Award is given to a company, public organisation, or individual who has outstanding leadership and principles of equality, significantly contributes to raising women's status, increases women's employment, has made a breakthrough in the recruitment structure by denying sexual discrimination and granting opportunities to women. The Award has especially stimulated government offices to increase recruitment and promotional ratio of women. Mr. Yoon Soek-Keum attributed his company's success to adopting these programmes.

Young BPW Awards were presented to Young BPW Australia and Young BPW Cayman Islands for their projects with young women in their respective countries.

Four young men (!!!) then sang the BPW National Anthem. This was not familiar to anyone present and it was difficult to decipher the tune. It will need some revision of it is to be taken up as a true national song for BPW members.

The banquet was followed by a lovely performance of a traditional Korean folk dance by BPW Korean members. A very special evening enjoyed by all.

On Monday morning the Conference was opened by the Prime Minister of South Korea, Mr. Dr. Duck Soo Han, followed by the first keynote speaker, Ms Chang Soon Kim, Vice Minister of Gender Equality and Family Korea. She commended BPW Korea for its work in improving the status of women in Korea, in particular the abolishment of the system that forced women to retire when they married, the lawsuit that won the case for nullifying sexual discrimination in retirement age, supporting the appointment of women as ministers, congress women and other social leadership roles, urging Korea to join CEDAW, and instituting the Gold Award for distinguished Korean male leaders who contribute to the employment and promotion of women.

International President Nok Viravan then gave the second keynote speech, on "Taking the Lead :The Challenge of Reforming BPW". She reported on progress to date in bringing the international finances under control and paying back the Battersea Fund, and on revising the structure of the International Federation. The format of the International Constitution and Policies is now being addressed with the aim of having them ready for discussion at Congress in Mexico next year. Our own Joan Bielby is a member of the Task Force, so we will be kept up to date as matters progress.

A panel was then presented on various aspects of New Dimensions in Leadership. Past International President, Dr. Antoinette Ruegg presented the results of research she has undertaken on the impact of genetics and biology on gender leadership styles. This was very interesting and at times, very funny, challenging some traditional beliefs in this area. She indicated she was willing to share this paper with us, so a copy will be available later in the year.

Ms Kobkarn Wattanavarangkul, member of the BPW Leadership Task Force, winner of the Leading Women Entrepreneur of the World 2004, and President of Toshiba, Thailand, spoke about her work, and Ms Soeng Sin Lee, President, Korea Consumer Agency, Spoke about women leadership in the public sector. It was clear from their collective experiences that Korean women still have to work hard and be very determined if they are to succeed in the male dominated Korean society.

Business Sessions were held on Membership Development : Progress and Issues, with reports from Liz Benham, BPWI Vice President Membership; Ambica Shrestha, Asia Pacific Regional Coordinator; and Rooma Para, Young BPW International. All areas reported recruitment problems and unfortunately there were no magic answers. Liz promoted the Triple Crown Membership Awards and we urge all clubs to look at and participate in this project. Information was distributed at our own Conference in Invercargill.

Organizational Review Sessions were held on Financial Sustainability of Non-Profit Organisations, and Reform Management, in relation to BPW International, with conference attendees having opportunity to ask questions and contribute comments and suggestions.

Business Sessions were held to report on and discuss activities, including Mentoring Programs World Wide by Anna Fang, member of the BPWI Mentoring Task Force; the Survey on Violence Against Women by Kay Morrison on behalf of Susan Jones, Chair of BPWI Projects Committee; and Working with the World Health Organisation, by Faye Gardiner, Chair of the BPWI Health Committee; and country reports on activities and advocacy.

Results of a survey on Migration and Job Prospects for Women was presented by Professor Young Hai Park, Sookmyung Women's University and former President of BPW Korea; Kio Chung Kim, Head of the APWINC e-Business Centre, explained the APEC WeBIZ Centre – Partnership programme for e-Business training; the Network Situation of Yenben Women in China was presented by Huashin Jin, Director of Yenben Women Research Centre, Yenben University. It was clear that discrimination against women is still very strong and very interesting to hear how women in other cultures are tackling the issues of job prospects and employment training.

Brainstorming sessions were held to gain feedback and input from attendees on BPWI financial reforms, structural changes and network. It will be interesting to see if any of the information and suggestions we provided are incorporated into the revision process.

Five nominations were received for the role of next Asia Pacific Regional Coordinator, including our own Immediate Past President Anita Devcich, as confirmed by Conference in May. After much discussion it was decided that as there were only 11 countries represented at the Conference and this did not form a quorum, the nominations would be received but not voted upon. As only two of the five nominees were present, Anita was able to speak to her nomination, and created a very strong impression on the attendees.

The Conference was not all work however, and on the Monday evening we were treated to a traditional Korean banquet at a very old traditional Korean house. The house was set in a beautiful Korean garden, and had been in the same family, passing from father to son for 500 years. The heads of the family had been high officials and state ministers, and the house is now owned and maintained by Seoul City, who hosted us.

On the final evening a Gala Dinner was held in the Grand Ballroom of the Prima Hotel, the Conference venue. A Candle Lighting Ceremony was held, a cake was cut and a champagne toast made in honour of the 39th Anniversary of BPW Korea. After a sumptuous Korean buffet, we were entertained by two dance performances, one a tango and the other a traditional Korean folk dance, both by BPW Korea members. It was a very happy party to end the Conference.

BPW Korea have signalled their intent to apply to hold the International Congress in Seoul in 2014. They have certainly demonstrated they will make a superb job of it.

Faye Gardiner, President, BPW NZ