**INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF LIBERAL RELIGIOUS WOMEN**

**(IALRW)**

The Council of the IALRW met in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia from 6-9 February. The meeting coincided with a two-day workshop hosted by IMAN, a local Muslim non-governmental organisation with which the IALRW President, Prof Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman, is closely involved.

The first day, an inter-faith workshop, was devoted to the plight of domestic helpers (maids, in local parlance), which is a crucial topic in Malaysia. The stereotypical portrayal of these workers is as victims of abuse: 70% were said to be engaged in illicit sexual activity. Yet employers had their own tales to tell, and there was clearly a need for more balanced reporting. Speakers from several religious traditions – Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity – drew on their own scriptures in addressing the topic, with equality, respect and selfless service being common threads. The day ended with firm recommendations to be made to the government on professionalization of the industry; training, support and protection of workers; regulation of agencies providing staff; and fostering right relationships with workers within families.

The second day, an intra-faith workshop, focused on Muslims in war and conflict situations in various parts of the world. Young women from Yemen, Syria, Myanmar and Kashmir, mostly PhD candidates at the International Islamic University of Malaysia, spoke from personal experience. We heard heart-rending accounts of famine and ongoing war in Yemen; of the dire situation in Syria, under constant bombardment by the regime and insurgents; of the displaced, stateless and persecuted Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and as refugees in Malaysia and elsewhere is south-east Asia; and of daily life under Indian military occupation in Kashmir where, it was suggested, former colonial powers need to be part of the solution. Western media cover these events, but to hear reports at first hand takes the news to a different level. The day was a call to action in whatever ways seem appropriate in our own countries, and to foster solidarity between women.

We watched an award-winning video about street children in the city of Cotabato in the Philippines, supported by charitable giving and social programmes organised by Muslim women in Singapore, who participated in the workshops. Children end up on the streets for many reasons; some drift away from home while their mothers are working elsewhere, often as domestic workers in neighbouring countries, in order to provide for their families, yet the street children are not without hope or ambition.

Peggy Kanada and Kathy Matsui from Japan introduced IALRW and its social action project in Ladakh, providing literacy training to women. Prof Kamar urged all those who had taken part in the workshops to come on board. There was genuine interest in joining IALRW, whether as individuals or member groups. Interestingly, the Association’s name proves a challenge in some quarters. ‘Liberal’ does not sit well in Malaysia, and ‘Religious’ would be problematic if trying to register an IALRW Chapter in Sri Lanka, where a new member group is about to be formed under the leadership of Dharshani Chandrasekena.

Prof Kamar is setting the pace and urges us all to get under way with a membership drive in our own countries. She is working on forming the Malaysian Women’s Interfaith Network, which will be affiliated to IALRW.

The venue of the next conference is not yet settled. Traditionally, IALRW has met immediately before the Congress of the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF). In 2018, IARF will hold its Congress as part of a much larger inter-faith conference in Washington DC, in the US, co-hosted by the Unitarian-Universalist Association and the World Conference on Religion and Peace, among others. Provisional dates are from 31 July to 3 August. IALRW will be represented at this larger conference, but not by its President or other Muslim members.

IALRW may yet choose to hold its own General Meeting elsewhere and at a different time. Christine Hayhurst

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