

WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



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29. A Work from Sorrow

The PEN International Women's Manifesto

Jennifer Clement

In thinking about women and migrations, I'd like to open by quoting words from the activist Grisha Prevoo, who spoke at a protest for racial justice in the Netherlands last year:

My name is Grisha Prevoo,

I have Dutch, Nuba, Romanian, Fulani, French, Greek blood running along Macedonian, Albanian, Jewish and Arab great-grandparents, snow-white aunties and dark as ebony uncles, short Italian cousins and tall Scandinavian ones.

All these colorful populations of relatives and ancestors jiggle and rattle under my skin all the time, oblivious of the way I look, behave, move, in the choices I make.

Today I choose to set away my own fears. I choose to come here on this stage, to stand up, to tell you, tell you to choose to fight for a world where we all stand equal, together, a place where black lives matter.

Today I also want to stand up for my mother, my beautiful Sudanese black mother. Who has been so loving to this world and has been mistaken for my nanny or the cleaning lady so many times. I'm fed up of these prejudices, needing to explain, time and time over she is my mother. My blood, the person who made me. I want a world for us, for all of us, free of prejudices. A world where everyone is treated and seen equal.

Grisha Prevoo's words address the complexity of identity and what it has meant to her and her mother. With these words, and those of so many other women in both the past and the present, and as the first

woman president of PEN International in 100 years, I wanted to place women writers at the center of the organization. PEN was founded in London in 1921 and is the oldest and largest organization of writers in the world. However, women writers were not allowed to be members until the 6th PEN Congress in Oslo in 1928. A resolution presented by PEN's founder, Catharine Amy Dawson Scott, and carried unanimously, stated women writers, "shall be considered eligible for membership of P.E.N. if writers." It seems that several women had previously been approached to run for president but most declined, including Virginia Woolf in the mid-1930s, who wrote amusingly to her sister that she had "never been so insulted" in all her life.

As part of the work to support women writers, the PEN International Women's Manifesto was drafted. The document acknowledges that women today continue to face censorship through lack of education, inequality, and violence—violence that, in these times, often means the silencing and vilifying of women through attack on social media. The unanimous approval of the PEN International Women's Manifesto, at the 83rd PEN International Congress in Lviv, changed PEN into an organization a central part of whose mission is gender equality and the struggle for the recognition of women writers, as well as the protection of women writers at risk. The manifesto also opened avenues of collaboration with the United Nations and established new important partnerships with organizations such as VIDA: Women in Literary Arts and UNESCO.

In my speech at the congress in Quebec, Canada, I said, "This is a noteworthy hour for PEN and for equal rights for men and women. We believe in words and know their power, so I can say here tonight what everyone in this room, a room of writers, can understand. There are languages where nouns are divided up by gender. This is true of Spanish and French—two of PEN's three official languages. What would happen if, in languages that divide things by gender, everything with female gender disappeared? Think for a minute of a world with half of everything missing—the moon, clouds, and stars to begin with. Symbolically this is what is happening in the world every time a girl is not allowed to learn to read or write or have ownership over her body and mind—half the world, half the human experience is missing. There

would be no magic, there would be no rain, there would be no word: *La magia, la lluvia, la palabra. La chance, la lune, la parole. There would be no chair, no empty chair.*

Gender censorship is an important part of loss of freedom of expression. How many great novels and poems are missing? How many ground-breaking ideas and discoveries? I know there are whole libraries that don't exist because of gender censorship.

In January 2017 the first PEN International Woman's Manifesto dinner was held in London at the home of the late Aline Davidoff, President Emeritus of PEN Mexico. Present at the dinner were Caroline Craido Perez, Lisa Appignanesi, Kamila Shamsie, Rebecca Servadio, Gillian Slovo, Ellah Allfrey, Gaby Wood, Laure Thorel, Romana Cacchioli, Margie Orford, Aline Davidoff and myself.

Kamila Shamsie discussed how she'd tabulated women's prizes. Her work pointed to the fact that, with few exceptions, every time a woman won a prize her novel's protagonist had been a man.

Carolina Criado Perez created the campaign to have a woman, who is not the Queen, on a British bank note. Criado Perez was so vilified she had to shut down all her social media accounts as she received so much hate mail including threats of rape and murder. Thanks to her we now have Jane Austen's face on a ten-pound note.

Over the next months Margie Orford, a member of the PEN International Board and President Emeritus of PEN South Africa, and I drafted the document.

In drafting the PEN International Women's Manifesto, we needed to acknowledge women's inequality in the world and how the violence against women was also a censorship issue. It needed to have a humanist position, which addressed that lack of knowledge or, more to the point, missing knowledge. We don't even know what the world has lost. PEN's Women's Manifesto speaks to this sorrow and ends with these words: Humanity is both wanting and bereft without the full and free expression of women's creativity and knowledge.

Here is the document:

THE PEN INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S MANIFESTO

PEN International was founded in London in 1921 to promote friendship and intellectual co-operation among writers everywhere, emphasize the role of literature in developing understanding, stand for freedom of expression and act as a powerful voice on behalf of writers harassed, silenced, imprisoned and sometimes killed for their views.

THE PEN INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S MANIFESTO

passed with unanimity
at the Assembly of Delegates of PEN International
83rd World Congress
Lviv, Ukraine
21 September 2017

*

Presented by Jennifer Clement, International President
and seconded by
Margie Orford, PEN International Board Member

THE PEN INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S MANIFESTO

The first and founding principle of the PEN Charter asserts that 'literature knows no frontiers'. These frontiers were traditionally thought of as borders between countries and peoples. For many women in the world—and for almost all women until relatively recently—the first, and the last and perhaps the most powerful frontier was the door of the house she lived in: her parents' or her husband's home.

For women to have free speech, the right to read, the right to write, they need to have the right to roam physically, socially and intellectually. There are few social systems that do not regard with hostility a woman who walks by herself.

PEN believes that violence against women, in all its many forms, both within the walls of a home or in the public sphere, creates dangerous forms of censorship. Across the globe, culture, religion and tradition are repeatedly valued above human rights and are used as arguments to encourage or defend harm against women and girls.

PEN believes that the act of silencing a person is to deny their existence. It is a kind of death. Humanity is both wanting and bereft without the full and free expression of women's creativity and knowledge.

PEN ENDORSES THE FOLLOWING INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNISED PRINCIPLES:

1. **NON-VIOLENCE:** End violence against women and girls in all of its forms, including legal, physical, sexual, psychological, verbal and digital; promote an environment in which women and girls can express themselves freely, and ensure that all gender-based violence is comprehensively investigated and punished, and compensation provided for victims.
2. **SAFETY:** Protect women writers and journalists and combat impunity for violent acts and harassment committed against women writers and journalists in the world and online.
3. **EDUCATION:** Eliminate gender disparity at all levels of education by promoting full access to quality education for all women and girls, and ensuring that women can fully exercise their education rights to read and write.
4. **EQUALITY:** Ensure that women are accorded equality with men before the law, condemn discrimination against women in all its forms and take all necessary steps to eliminate discrimination and ensure the full equality of all people through the development and advancement of women writers.
5. **ACCESS:** Ensure that women are given the same access to the full range of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights to enable the full and free participation and public recognition of women in all media and across the spectrum of literary forms. Additionally, ensure equal access for women and girls to all forms of media as a means of freedom of expression.
6. **PARITY:** Promote the equal economic participation of women writers, and ensure that women writers and journalists are employed and paid on equal terms to men without any discrimination.

