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News Release

International forum encourages judges to ‘mind the gap’

The Supreme Court served as one of the ‘host venues’ for the judicial equivalent of the Olympic Games earlier this month, with around 600 judges from more than 40 countries converging on London for four days of debate and discussion.

The 11th Biennial Conference of the International Association of Women Judges (IAWJ) was the largest ever, fostering professional dialogue and personal support among judges across the world, who are interested in the equality and human rights of women worldwide.

The baton had been passed to the UK Association of Women Judges – chaired by Supreme Court Justice, Baroness Hale of Richmond, who was also President of the IAWJ – following the 2010 conference held in Seoul, South Korea. A year of preparing the successful ‘bid’ to host the next conference, and then two years of intense planning and fundraising, culminated in the UK team arranging a varied programme of visits, presentations and discussion sessions between 2 and 5 May 2012.

Many delegates joined guided tours of the Supreme Court, where they were welcomed by Lord Phillips, President of the Court. The bulk of the conference was held at Church House, Westminster.

The theme of the conference, ‘Keeping Safe, Keeping Well’, was explored through plenary discussions on a number of challenging topics, drawing on the direct experience of delegates in adjudicating in difficult environments. Discussions included:

- The menace of ‘sextortion’ – the combination of sex and corruption, where people in authority demand sexual favours in return for assistance with some form of official administration;

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- Strategies for identifying and removing the barriers to women who are victims of trafficking, sexual or domestic violence from coming forward, and ensuring that decision-makers correctly recognise the victims and offenders in such cases;
- The need for differentiated gender-based standards in prisons, which recognise that women have different needs from men, and that most women in prison are also mothers;
- Judicial health and safety – from managing physical and verbal threats during difficult cases, to handling the strains and tensions of high office.

The conference also marked the launch of the International Judges' Forum, bringing together IAWJ members working in the international courts. This step creates a new caucus of support for judicial officers tackling some of the most unpleasant issues heard before any court in the world.

The culmination of the conference was the closing session addressed by Navanethem Pillay, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, a former national and international judge and IAWJ member.

Lady Hale stresses that the organisation actively welcomes male members: "The truth is that we have the wrong name. We are not just an association of women judges - we are an association of judges who believe in the equal rights of women. And there are many men who believe this just as passionately as any woman."

"The conference was unashamedly about women's issues because the IAWJ is unashamedly about women's issues," adds Lady Hale. "It has been said that our role is to 'Mind the gap' – the gap between the law in the books and what actually happens to and for the victims on the ground."

The conference was supported by the UK Government through the Lord Chancellor, and by the Nuffield Foundation, the Law Society, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Association of Commonwealth Judges and Magistrates, and many other sponsors from the legal profession, legal publishers and service providers.

"On a year when the eyes of the world are upon London, I believe this conference helped demonstrate the city and the justice system at its best. Rather like another great event happening this summer, the conference provided a platform for the rest of the world to share experiences and best practice, build networks and celebrate what unifies us – the common threads of democracy and the rule of law," says Lady Hale.

"The support received from the legal profession by the UK Association of Women Judges while we have been preparing the conference has been first rate, and I would like to put on record my thanks to all those who have helped us."

The 2014 conference will take place in Arusha, Tanzania, hosted by the Tanzanian Women Judges Association.

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