The 20th International Convention in Istanbul, Turkey, more than lived up to its expectations. With almost 1500 Soroptimists travelling by plane, train and automobile - many staying at The Hilton Bosphorus, the extremely well chosen Convention location. Bringing together friends, new and old and delivering traditional fun, friendship, plenty of laughter, this years Convention offered a spectacular programme of inspired high profile and passionate speakers and panellists - devised by the Programme team of Anne Simon and Inci Erdem Artan.

The theme, Soroptimists Educate to Lead; Fresh Ideas Empowering Women introduced a wealth of new ideas and solutions, with hard hitting stories and inspired perspectives from key speakers. Soroptimists heard from many notable names including previous Peace Prize award winner Silvana Arbia, Rashida Manjoo, Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Anne K. Ream, Founder of The Voices and Faces Project and Michael Kaufman, Co-founder White Ribbon, who delivered a hugely inspiring speech underlining the crucial importance of engaging men & boys in the discussion of violence against women.

The Opening Ceremony began with a welcome by Convention Chair Emine Erdem and President of the Turkish Union, Ilke Erol. A procession of flags was led up to a stage framed by a Soroptimistanbul banner and floral displays; perfectly dressed for such a momentous occasion. A Convention highlight came by way of the Roll Call, when visiting Soroptimists from each country and territory made themselves known, much to the enjoyment of the packed audience. Opening Speeches were given by International President Ann Garvie and the Turkish Official Authorities, followed with a Welcome by Federation President of Europe, Ulla Madsen, and an enchanting and thought-provoking music and storytelling performance by Judith Malika Liberman. An inspired choice for Master of Ceremony was Zeynep Erdem, bringing youth, energy, maturity and confidence to her role.

The festivities continued at the Friendship Evening - Soroptimists gathered by the Hilton Istanbul Bosphorus Hotel Pool and were treated to wonderful food, music and a catwalk show with a surprising but delightful guest model, International President Ann Garvie.

As the sun went down over the opening of the 20th Soroptimist International Convention it was clear that the next few days were to be inspiring, surprising and ambitious; the kind of days that would go on to make memories that last a lifetime.
Hugely popular on Friday July 10, was Keynote Speaker Elif Shafak, international bestselling author, Turkey. “The necessity of sisterhood crossing all boundaries” --Elif Shafak.

This statement by Elif Shafak embodies the spirit of Soroptimists here in Istanbul. United by hope and an ambition to change the lives of women and girls. Soroptimist Karen Marshall, SI La Conner, Washington USA says: “At my first International Convention I am a sponge, absorbing as much information and Soroptimist passion as possible. Elif Shafak began our day with her personal story and the concepts that books help save many people - stories change us, creativity is contagious”. Elif is Turkey’s most read woman writer and has published 13 books blending Western and Eastern traditions of storytelling. Lighting up the stage at the Convention Centre in the very first Plenary session ‘Educate to Lead: Far we’ve come, far we need to go’, Elif talked of the importance of expressing ourselves in written culture - bringing women from the private space to the public space. She said we must “encourage young women to be an individual” and noted “the beautiful energy in the room”.

If we were not already convinced that in order to eradicate Violence Against Women we need to engage men and boys, the appearance of keynote speaker Michael Kaufman, Co-founder White Ribbon, made giant leaps in confirming this. Soroptimist Karen Marshall says:“Michael presented a lively, occasionally humorous keynote with his message of the power and pain dichotomy within men, something I had never heard before. He concluded with a serious call for action: we must engage men and boys to speak out and prevent violence”. Michael invited us to reach out to men with compassion and empathy and talked of the pressures of being a young man in today’s society. “We set boys up for failure”, “big boys don’t cry”.

Following the keynote addresses, the panel discussion for the theme Educate to Lead provided fascinating facts, thoughts and dialogue. Marie-Gabrielle Cajoly noted “Education for women gives each woman a chance to be who and what she wants to be” and noted “a lesson learned is that education is about much more than just employment”. Theresa Devasahayam presented the startling fact that only 17% of women are in leadership positions worldwide. Ursula Wynhoven discussed the importance of STEM programmes and a girls need to “see it to be it.”


Anusha Santhirasthipam was moderator for the afternoon Plenary Session ‘Advocating for Gender Equality: From Vision to Action’. Distinguished expert speakers were Ingibjorg Gisladottir, UN Women Regional Director Europe and Central Asia and Former Foreign Minister of Iceland, Liri Kopaci-Di Michele, Head, Equality Division, Council of Europe and Yakin Erturk, Human Rights Expert, Member of Committee for the Prevention of Torture at the Council of Europe and Former Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, OHCHR, The United Nations. Soroptimist Karen Marshall adds: “The afternoon Plenary Session made me realize that I need to improve my understanding of the work taking place at the United Nations and encourage my club members to do the same. Another reminder to cross all boundaries”.

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The Soroptimist International of Europe Peace Prize is awarded every two years to honour individuals for their remarkable achievements to promote peace. Following the Afternoon Plenary Session - ‘Advocating for gender equality: From vision to action’, the winner, Edit Schlaffer, Founder and Executive Director of Women without Borders/SAVE was awarded this coveted prize. Edit accepted the award “on behalf of all the women who are willing to join us to make the world a better place” and joins previous winners Silvana Arbia and Carla Del Ponte.
On the morning of Saturday July 11, Soroptimist International President, Ann Garvie, began with a spirited call to action. Calling upon all Soroptimists to hold leaders accountable if they ignore gender equality, she said: “We have a responsibility to the next generation . . . we cannot achieve equality without education”.

The Plenary Session focused on ‘Women’s Status in Turkey’, The Pannellists were Aysegul Ildeniz, Global Vice President, Intel New Technologies, Hasan Suel, President of Vodafone Foundation, Cansen Basaran-Symes, President of Turkish Industry and Business Association and Gulay Barbarosoglu, Rector, Bogazici University, Turkey. Nakiye Boyacigiller, Professor of Management, Sabanci University, Turkey led the discussions surrounding the challenges facing Turkish Women in this swiftly modernised country. We heard from esteemed business leaders discussing successes in bringing about gender equality in their workplaces. The discussion turned to the importance of women using technology as an empowering tool both in the workplace and in their personal lives.

This session was followed by ‘Defeating Violence’. Rashida Manjoo urged us to look harder at dealing with the root causes of violence. She highlighted: “It is not about - I’m somebody’s wife, daughter, sister and I need to be protected - it’s about being human”. Soroptimist Karen Marshall adds: “The plenary session ‘Defeating Violence’ gave us fascinating global perspectives”. A special address was given by Anne K. Ream, Founder of the Voices and Faces Project, an award winning storytelling project created to bring the testimonies of survivors of gender-based violence to the attention of the public. ‘Lived Through This: Listening to the Stories of Sexual Violence Survivors’ is a truly moving account of women which “opens the hearts and minds through personal stories” and “demands you re-think what you used to believe deeply”. Anne believes such stories, and the telling of these stories can demand change. “Behind the story I tell is the one I wish you could hear”.

Alice Nkom, Lawyer and Founder, the Association for the Defence of Homosexuals, Cameroon, talked of her journey, the challenges and the rewards. Alice began by sharing her gratitude: “Aaah, let me tell you I am very happy to be here. Thank you for inviting me and helping me to discover a new Country, Turkey and Istanbul, and the powerful members of Soroptimist International”. As the oldest female lawyer in the country with 47 years practice, Alice said: “When you visit me in my office you feel my smile”. She talked of the obstacles she faces in Cameroon, one of the countries that penalises homosexuality and says: “You are a mother, you never choose the sex of your children or their sexuality. You choose to love them on the basis of equality”.

Silvana Arbia, Former Registrar, International Criminal Court and former Chief Prosecutor, UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, won the SIE Peace Prize in 2013. Her support for the Defeating Violence Project (a new project that aims to gain a deeper understanding of violence against women and girls and address prevention), was evident, and Silvana talked of how we “aspire to be free from violence; we will fight for that and try to achieve that; we have to plan action”.

Mid-Afternoon offered two sets of Interactive Sessions and Workshops including: ‘Making your voice heard at the local, national and international levels,’ ‘Communications’, and ‘Slavery in the 21st Century: The realities of human trafficking’. 
Sunday July 12 began with ‘Public Speaking Lectures and Awards’. *Fresh Ideas, Empowering Women* was a theme effortlessly demonstrated by five young, vibrant and highly capable women, setting out on their own paths, from different countries across the world.

Invited to speak at the 20th Soroptimist International Convention, this highly inspiring Special Programme, introduced by Maureen Maguire, Chair SI Governance Committee, Northern Ireland, focused on the winners of local public speaking competitions: *Flora Garner*, England, *Ciara Maguire*, Republic of Ireland, *Tan Yan Ru*, Singapore, *Rose Lakoro Pitoi*, Papua New Guinea and *Alana Hughes*, Northern Ireland. Speaking passionately on the topic of empowering women and gender equality, each of the women inspired their audience with their ambition, conviction, knowledge and vision for their own lives and those of women and girls.

Eighteen year old Alana Hughes asked: “How high can a woman fly?” before saying that we should reach for the skies and if we don’t have a runway? Grab a shovel and build one. Tan Yan Ru suggested that “we shouldn’t be afraid of our voice” and Ciara said women and girls should “be as fearless as the women in the stories you have admired”.

Flora talked of her passion for He For She, and as an aspiring actress, she made it clear that UN Women Goodwill Ambassador Emma Watson, was a highly influential role model in her life. Rose Lakoro Pitoi talked of the stories that inspired her and her dreams and direction, mentioning the importance of advocates for education and Bring Back Our Girls.
As we moved into the next session - the Closing Plenary, the focus naturally shifted to ‘Listening to the Voices of the Future.’ Victoria Pritchard, President SI Chester, Sareh Ameri, President SI Dubai, Kate Brady Kean, President Elect, SI Auckland and Lee Ann Cochran, SI Columbus Franklin County, joined Yvonne Simpson, then SI International President Elect, for a forward thinking discussion on the challenges faced by SI as we move forward. Questions were asked on how to engage young women, and how to build on the achievements of SI and continue to develop and grow.

Karen Marshall says: “The Panellists shared with the audience thoughts about attracting and retaining members. Each panellist reflected similar beliefs about the need to focus on action and results; the use of technology to enhance the SI mission, visibility and recruitment techniques, together with the importance of club flexibility and openness and the value of dispelling the myth of cost and time as reasons not to join”.

In the remainder of the afternoon, Federations presented reports and the ‘Global Best Practices Celebrations’ - showcasing the remarkable work of all four Federations.

Kuala Lumpur was announced as the location for Soroptimist International Convention 2019 and presented with much fanfare, and the stage came alive with dance and music. International President Ann Garvie gave a final, passionate call for the need to focus on ‘Educate to Lead’. During the following, very moving installation of the new International President, Yvonne Simpson, Yvonne shared her exciting plans for her December 10th President’s Appeal, Nepal and outlined her vision for her term as International President.

This year’s Convention proved to be a truly remarkable and impeccably planned event; Soroptimists will surely have left feeling newly inspired. We are sure you will join us in thanking the Convention Sponsors, the Organisation Committee, and everyone involved for working so hard, for so long, on the creation of this most unforgettable occasion.

A special thank you to Soroptimists Karen Marshall, SI La Conner, Washington USA, Chris Knight SI SWP Friendship Link Coordinator and Cathy Coyte, SI Eldoret, Kenya for helping with SI Communications so generously at Convention, and gathering information in order to make this review possible.
Workshops

Making your voice heard at the local, national and international levels - Hilary Ratcliffe International Programme Director.

“We were turning members away as we were running an interactive workshop where we needed room to move around and have discussions - not possible of course if participants were standing. The icebreaker was a quiz-question such as ‘what do you know about key dates in the United Nations year’, ‘what is CEDAW, ECOSOC and where does Soroptimist International have UN representatives?’

Having challenged the members of the workshop, we then talked about what we mean by advocacy and what is the point of it - what are we trying to achieve? Three case studies were handed out: one local; one national; one international. Each group of eight were given twenty-five minutes to look at their issue, talk about what they intended to do in an advocacy campaign and then to report their findings to all the members of the workshop. From this, certain key messages and strategies were drawn out to help in our targeted advocacy. All seemed to enjoy the experience. All in all I believe it was a workshop that was active, involved and aware, which is actually what advocacy is all about!

Soroptimist and communications volunteer Karen Marshall chose three workshops during Convention. “I attended ‘Slavery in the 21st Century: The realities of Human Trafficking breakout session’. The three key messages for me from the outstanding panellists were: 1) Solutions need to come from within our communities; 2) Everyone needs to promote the concept “if you see something, say something” and 3) Education of young women and young men is critical to eliminate the problem.

Also choosing the afternoon workshop ‘Women and Islam’ which as with many of the workshops proved extremely popular, Karen adds: “I quickly realized that what I know about modern Islamic culture is only what I am fed through the media. This session transformed my perceptions and understanding of the culture and religion. I loved the question: “In addition to education, what one word or thought describing Islam would lead to better understanding?”. The panelists chose peace, fairness, freedom, leaving ego and peace again.

The final session I attended discussed strategies for empowering women. The key takeaway points focused on two branches. One branch, - personal growth, includes the ongoing need to mentor, coach and teach women how to properly network. The second branch focused on workplace culture including the need for flexibility in workplace schedules and telecommuting opportunities”.

Did you join in any of the Workshops at Convention? Would you like to add a short report to this Review? If so please email 100 words or less to hq@soroptimistinternational and we may include your report in the next edition of The Convention Review!
Chris Knight SISWP Friendship Link Coordinator and Club Secretary SI Moreton North Inc. has been a Soroptimist for 29 years. This is her 5th International Convention. Chris loves the extensive and diverse network of Soroptimist friends that she has around the world who share the same passion for empowering women to have a better life and to live their dreams. She has travelled extensively and said that what she enjoys most is offering and accepting the warm hospitality of her Soroptimist Sisters. She lives by the motto - ‘Never Give Anything Less than your Absolute Best. That is what Best Sisters Do’ Namaste.

Mech this (Elizabeth) Driessen, SI Reutlingen, Germany, Charter Member for 13 years - loves the ideals of SI Sisters working together to change the world. This is her first Convention. Local club projects include supporting young Turkish migrant children to adapt to a new country and culture. They also teach them how to look after horses and understand how their feelings can impact on the horses. Another programme involves working with young girls to teach them about health, sexuality, biology of their body, self respect and self esteem and relationships. They encourage them to think about a word and right down a little poem about their feelings. This has had a very positive effect on helping them to feel safe and share their feelings.

Thelma Luxton, SI Waitara, New Zealand member for 31 years. This is her 8th International Convention. She loves the philosophy of SI and enjoys attending board meetings and listening to the discussions. She enjoys her community service work at local and international levels and works closely with other community groups to address local needs.

Hanne Knap-Go SI Hilversum, Netherlands, has been coordinating the Open Heart Open Door Register since 2007. She enjoys seeing the contact and communications grow between members on the OHOD and is delighted to hear about the exchange visits. Hanne joined SI in 1978 and has attended every International Convention during that time. She loves the opportunity to learn from others - listen to different opinions - doing good work for women nationally and internationally. Our Awareness is our first point if understanding an issue - our Advocacy is where you can give your heart to an issue you are concerned about and then take action that is realistic to address the problem.

Paula Siddle is the National Representative for New Zealand. This is her 3rd International Convention. She loves the friendship and networks and what we do as Soroptimist’s around the world to improve the lives of women and girls. Paula enjoys travelling, learning about the history of other cultures and immersing herself in nature. Attending Conventions provides a gateway to visit and explore other countries and to meet so many more Soroptimist members.

Dipa Khakurel SI Kathmandu, Nepal joined SI in 2012. This is her first SI Convention and she loves the bonds of love & sisterhood and getting to know SI members from all around the world. “As women we are the same irrespective of countries - there are no boundaries. After the earthquake it was hard to contact the members in my club. The support that we received from our Soroptimist Sisters all around the world gave us the courage to help people especially in remote areas and with so many after shocks. We really appreciate the help from our Sister Soroptimist.”
Doris Triki and Clara Dridi Stas from Tunisia have been members of SI for 6 and 7 years respectively. This is their 1st SI Convention. They love the connections with women all around the world and the way that we can work together to improve the lives of women and girls. Their club projects include tree planting, working with primary schools by providing books, clothes & shoes for the children and organising visits by doctors, dentists and optometrists to undertake health checks for the children.

Hilke Ramm SI Ratzburg, Germany, this is her 1st International Convention - has been a Soroptimist since 2002. Loves networking - working with women - working from her heart to improve the lives of women and girls.

Eva Maria Bodin, Stockholm City and Jytte Roos, Stockholm Ekero have been members since 1974 and 2000. This is their 1st SI Convention. They love the International Friendship of Soroptimist International. The Swedish Union won a Best Practice Award for their Solvatten Project - it is a sun water solution using solar energy to purify contaminated water. Founder of Solvatten Petra Wadstrom developed the concept while working in Australia and trialing the techniques in Kenya and Nepal. It is now making a difference to communities all around the world.

Carin Weston & Pam Robertson, SI Hartford England. First Convention they have attended. Local projects include supporting carers, safe places and Living Room & Water Aid. Loves the friendship - opportunities to meet other SI members from around the world. Have met up with their Friendship Link Club of SI Gaziosmanpasa Ankara Turkey.
Kylie Hillard and Leigh Ellwood Brown from SI Brisbane Australia - this is Kylie’s 1st Convention and she has been a member for one year. Leigh has only missed one Convention since 1982 and is a Past SISWP President and SI Organisational Development - they love meeting other SI members from around the world and learning about the many successful projects that empower women and girls.

Carol Johnstone SI Canberra, Australia - has been a member for 14 years. Her mother Shirley Smith was a member of SI for 44 years. This is her first Convention and she loves the opportunities to give something back to help others in the community. Local projects include Aussie Hero Quilts and Laundry Bags. These special quilts are for the fallen soldiers and their families. Carol has been a member in Australia and Indonesia.

Soroptimist Sisters Tove Elise Jaeger and Ulla Jenson from SI Naestved Club, Denmark. Projects include human trafficking in Lithuania / Romania and helping young girls to obtain their birth certificates. They love the Soroptimist Friendship with members all over the world and the projects that support women and girls.

Gerda Ardies and Dina Nevens club, SI Veurne-Westhoek, Belgium. Gerda has been a member for 32 years and Dina for 3 years. First International Convention - love meeting Soroptimists from around the world. Club projects include bringing a little sunshine into the lives of others. They support women who have survived breast cancer, teaching orphans to learn another language, advocating for people to join the organ donor register - they are wanting to link up with clubs supporting refugees with sanitary aids.

Ailsa Rothenbury SI Joondalup, Western Australia - has been an SI member for 13 yrs. Second International Convention and loves meeting new Soroptimists. Has met members today from Ivory Coast and Germany. Likes working on International Projects that align with UN Resolutions that improve the lives of women and girls.