

A Speech at the Stavern Rally / by Sissel Høihjelle Michelsen

IIW Board Director 2015/2017

Committee Members, Madame President, dear All,

Good morning and thank you for what we have shared so far during these days.

Before a new Inner Wheel year starts our incoming international President reveals her theme for her presidential year. The themes, that are supposed to be short, can be just ordinary, business like or thought provoking.

Madame President's theme, "Leave a Lasting Legacy", belongs to the last group and has triggered continuous questions in me – and I would think in other Inner Wheel members as well, which means it is a good theme: What kind of legacy would we love to leave behind? How do we do it? Have we so far left a legacy? If not, do we still have the chance to do so? The common denominator in my questions is WE. Who are WE in Inner Wheel: The whole organization, countries, Districts or Clubs?

When I joined Inner Wheel in 1987, I didn't know much about it, except for some entries in my local newspaper as a youngster, hardly anything as an adult. But I'm happy for Borghild who never gave up asking me to join! At my first meeting in Gwen's home, I heard the name Bekoaka, and I knew instantly that there was something there that caught my interest. I'll return to Bekoaka in a second. The first hindrance for me though, was that I was accepted as a member only because I was married to a Rotarian and that was more or less unheard of – and not house trained in Norway in those days. But after that first encounter, I put that aspect quickly behind me and started enjoying myself in my Grorud club.

There may be some rather new members here today and of course you, Madame President, who would not possibly know anything about Bekoaka which is a place in Madagascar where Inner Wheel Norway helped building a leprosy hospital. A natural project for an Inner Wheel country like Norway that is still proud to have had the doctor and scientist, dr. Armauer Hansen as a fellow Norwegian - the man who identified the bacteria that causes leprosy (Hansen's disease). Working through the Norwegian Missionary Society we were reading about sacks of cement to make concrete – organised by our Inner Wheel members – and then what was part of the club meetings, to cut/tear up bandages from sheets and duvet covers, we collected thin, used, but clean tights to hold up the bandages and second hand eye glasses, outdated for us, but of such true help for the leper patients. Then came the day when it became horribly expensive to ship our barrels with the above mentioned contents. Money was still collected to buy the things needed locally. We continued this project for 25 years, the end of it was reconstructing hospital buildings after devastating

hurricanes, this time also with money from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the annual TV show collecting money for good causes focusing on the lives of third world women.

All clubs participated – it was an excellent project. The following four years were dedicated SOS - Children's Villages in Murmansk county in Russia. We were responsible for one of the houses to be built in the village. The clubs in our five districts met our goal a year ahead of schedule.

By now, I think you are all wondering if I will hit the goal for my little speech – don't worry, I'm coming closer now. In June 2004 FOKUS, the Norwegian umbrella organisation dealing with development for third world women got the fundraising campaign and TV show, *Dreamcatcher* for 2005, focusing on violence against women. Inner Wheel Norway wanted to get money for a project helping the fistula women in Ethiopia. Fistula is caused by endless deliveries resulting in birth injuries for the mother and death for the child. These women are left out of their societies because there is a constant leakage of urine and sometimes faeces. As the Council's ISO at the time I submitted the idea for a Fistula project for FOKUS – and they were eager to let us have it, though we didn't meet the requirements for project support as we had no cooperating IW club in Ethiopia. We had to find a partner. First, for a couple of months, I collaborated with a Norwegian organisation working in Ethiopia, but unfortunately, the day I was invited to FOKUS to tell them about our plans, this idea failed, due to circumstances outside their and my reach. I contacted the Norwegian Missionary Society immediately through the nurse in charge from our time in Bekoaka as they are working in Ethiopia as well. She gave me a contact name at the head office in Stavanger. This woman exclaimed "Inner Wheel – how wonderful" and within 10 minutes she agreed to have a project with us and I could meet the FOKUS women a little late for our meeting. My heart was beating not only from running to the meeting, but also from joy. NMS is a professional organisation as health related work is not mixed with their religious work. How many of us get a reply like this when we mention Inner Wheel? It is rather the other way round: - Who are you or what's that?

Right there I experienced that our members left a lasting legacy from the work they initiated and fulfilled through 25 years. It is good to be recognised, our name met with respect and an eager willingness to continue further cooperation. It is up to us to pass on this legacy, this inheritance from the past. This is Norway, no longer a big IW country, but we are only 5 million inhabitants so according to that - we are not that bad! And we are an old Inner Wheel country as Bergen was the first IW club outside Britain – for them Proposal 17 from the Istanbul Convention came too late. They disbanded three years ago.

But the rest of us are up and kicking! Aren't we, girls? And when people ask us about IW, they want to know what we do, not who we are!

I miss being able to say what we as an international organization do. I was happy when adding to our own national and international projects, I could say – And worldwide we are dealing with a tetanus project through UNICEF and later on with girls' education first in Madagascar then in Bolivia. Also with UNICEF. The causes were excellent, but feedback/ updating was non-existing. This is a problem with a UN organization – we only contribute with money, they take the credit! I want things done in our own name, use media for information, use our own resourceful members – and as a women organization we should have women's welfare and health in mind and help ending violence against our sisters. If a woman has a good life, her children and her spouse will have the same. At the Stockholm Convention in 2000 it was decided that we should have a joint social project running from one convention to the next. Since the Istanbul Convention 2012 this is no longer a reality, I'm sorry to say. We'd better find something that more than one country can do – to work together and enjoy it! And with a coordinator at HQ!

When we started our fistula project, FGM was also in the picture. Fistula is in many ways a result of lack of care and medical help at childbirth, whereas FGM is an attack on the female body, often from infancy. It is a deliberate mutilation of our sexual organs and a conscious decision to destroy what physically defines us as women. And it's found almost everywhere on the globe, absolutely not only in Africa, though it originated at the court of the pharaohs in Egypt. It's found in Norway through immigration, and we can't help it if young girls go home to their country of origin, it's even found in India, a lot more in Malaysia and the worst country is Indonesia. Some African countries have forbidden it by law, but not everyone reads the laws. It's often been linked with religion, but nothing is written either in the Bible or the Koran

When I joined Inner Wheel it was because of our third objective, to foster international understanding. International understanding is not to close your eyes to unfair and violent treatment of girls and women – it is to meet them open-eyed and challenge them! When we have approx. 100,000 resourceful women as members in IIW, we are a powerful group, let's not waste our potential.

At the outset of my speech I started with a few questions and who are WE. The great WE are all of us, Club members, District committee members, Council members, members of the International Governing Body throughout our whole organization. We have to be seen and recognised if we are to attract new members, and then we have to bear in mind that we only build up our reputation by working continuously for a good cause, and we have to see those in need of our help. A joint social project will be the glue in our organization, a much needed glue – though we mustn't forget the local and national projects that make everyday Inner Wheel life a blessing! Oh, yes, there is still time to gain something that is worth sending down to new generations of Inner Wheel Members.