

Report on the International Tribunal on Crimes against Women

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REPORT ON THE INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNAL ON CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN

Diana E. H. Russell

Talk to one another, talk to the world, bring to light the shameful truths that half of humanity is trying to cover up. The Tribunal is in itself a feat. It heralds more to come. I salute this Tribunal as being the start of a radical decolonization of women.

With these inspiring words from Simone de Beauvoir, the first International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women opened in Brussels, Belgium. Over 2,000 women from forty countries participated in this event which took place at the Palais des Congrès from March 4-8, 1976, ending on International Women's Day.

In contrast to the International Women's Year (IWY) Conference in Mexico City (June-July, 1975), it was a feminist event. Organized by feminists active in the women's movement, rather than by governments or establishment institutions, the Tribunal was a conference of ordinary women, not leaders or "stars"--women of all ages and backgrounds, though most of them were of moderate means.

The focus was entirely on the oppression of women. Furthermore, as Simone de Beauvoir pointed out, women attending the Tribunal came to denounce the crimes perpetrated against us by the male-dominated nations in which we all live, and to develop strategies to combat them.

The idea of having an International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women was conceived at Femø (an international feminist camp in Denmark) in August, 1974 as a feminist response to the U.N.-declared International Women's Year. The Tribunal was born at a workshop of the International Feminist Conference held in Frankfurt in November, 1974, and attended by over 600 women. It was further developed at an international planning meeting in Paris where the Coordinating Committee was formed.¹

Diana E. H. Russell, one of the organizers of the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women, is co-editor of Crimes Against Women: Proceedings of the International Tribunal. At present, she is compiling a book tentatively entitled Manstrocities, which details these crimes as they exist throughout the world.

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The conference was financed by the participants; through voluntary work the largest international feminist meeting to date was held. Women from eighteen countries raised \$10,627. Additional money was collected during the Tribunal from the sale of posters and badges, through collections, and by means of a small registration fee. Because of the enormous contribution of women's energy without pay, the expenses of the Tribunal amounted to the incredibly low figure of \$14,421.

The Tribunal was unique among international women's conferences in focusing on personal testimonies. This focus emerged of the belief common in the women's movement that when we start to understand our personal problems as women, we will understand that they are political issues. The Tribunal was unique also in that we did not use the male model of conferences. The organizing committee, sensitive to the feelings of those present, stepped down so that other women could participate in running the Tribunal. Consequently, the active involvement of the participants in the whole experience was in striking contrast to the passivity of audiences in more traditional conferences, such as the World Congress for IWY in East Berlin.

Further, the male media were not permitted to disrupt the Tribunal, as happened so frequently at the IWY conference in Mexico. Yet unlike the International Feminist Conference that was held in Frankfurt, November 15-17, 1974, the Tribunal received considerable media coverage in Europe (though not in the U.S.).

Forty countries participated in the Tribunal (see Appendix). Participation from these countries varied from a maximum of over 300 women in attendance from Germany to a minimum of tapes or written testimony sent from Greece.² In almost all instances at least one woman, but usually two, or more, gave prepared testimony about crimes against women in their countries.

Crimes about which prepared testimony was given included: forced motherhood (unavailability of contraception or abortion); medical crimes (abuses by gynecologists, psychiatrists and other doctors; dangerous experimentation on women's bodies; unnecessary surgery--hysterectomies, mastectomies, clitoridectomies; forced sterilization); economic and legal crimes against women (the double workload of women in the labor force, the double discrimination against Third World and immigrant women, the unpaid work of housewives, the oppression of women in the patriarchal family, the outlawing of divorce, the persecution of single mothers, the persecution of lesbians, and the neglect of elderly women); and violence against women (rape, molestation of female children, beating, killing, brutalization of women in pornography and prostitution, and violence towards women prisoners, political and nonpolitical).

The U.S. Committee chose to speak about femicide (the murder of women and girls by men) and the disproportionate number of women living in poverty in the U.S. Pat Parker, a Bay Area poet, agreed to testify and read her poem "Womanslaughter" which describes the murder of her sister by her ex-husband. Catherine Day-Jermany, a woman from Washington, D.C. who was on welfare for a few

years after she and her children were abandoned by her husband, testified on the issue of poverty. Both women are Black. Yvonne Wanrow, a Native American woman, testified about the injustice of her two twenty-year prison sentences for killing a man when defending herself, her children, and her babysitter's child from a white rapist.

Spontaneous testimony from the floor was given on clitoridec-tomy, still practiced in several African countries, the recent decapitation of several women belonging to a harem in Saudi Arabia for attempting to escape, and the internment of lesbians in re-habilitation camps in "revolutionary" Mozambique.

There were workshops on most of the topics about which prepared testimony was given such as abortion, medical crimes, economic crimes, Third World women, wages for housework, rape, wife beating, pros-titution, pornography, lesbians, women political prisoners, as well as other topics, e.g., self-help, elderly women, single mothers, feminist therapy, anti-feminist socialism (as in Mozambique), the setting up of an international newsletter, and the outcome of the Tribunal.

On the fifth and final day, women critiqued the Tribunal and made resolutions and proposals for change. There were resolutions denouncing almost all the crimes about which women testified, demands for change, and proposals about strategy, tactics, and solutions for these crimes.

As Simone de Beauvoir said, "The Tribunal is in itself a feat." In fact, it was a miracle, given our lack of resources. A major accomplishment was breaking through nationalism: women of the world united to oppose patriarchy everywhere. For example the Israeli participants proposed that

The dialogue between Arab and Jewish women that has begun at this Tribunal shall continue within the framework of International Feminism. As women we understand that our oppression is by men and not by opposing nationalities. This Tribunal is the first International forum in which both Israeli and Arab women have each publicly condemned their own societies for their oppression against women, rather than con-demning one another. This act on the part of the Middle Eastern women demonstrates that International Feminism can rise above male-dominated nationalistic power politics.

Mini-Tribunals, inspired by the International Tribunal, have been held in Dublin, Ireland; in Munich, West Germany; and in New York and San Francisco. The recent, very successful Conference on Violence Against Women organized in San Francisco (December 4 and 5, 1977) was also inspired by the Tribunal, and this in turn has given rise to other actions and groups such as the newly formed Women's Anti-Degradation Alliance (WADA).

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Aside from the resolutions, many ideas were discussed without being formulated as resolutions. Some are sure to reach fruition, such as the possibility of holding national tribunals in Japan and India. There was also considerable talk about organizing international tribunals to focus on one particular facet of crimes against women, for example: battered women, women political prisoners, immigrant women, rape, persecution of lesbians, economic crimes, and discrimination against women in politics. In addition, there was a proposal to hold an international feminist conference on strategies to combat crimes against women, as well as tribunals.

Action has already begun on the following proposals:

An International Feminist Newsletter is being published every three months from information collected at ISIS (case postale 301-CH-1227, Carouge, Geneva, Switzerland).

An International Feminist Network is being formed. The coordinator is Nicole Van de Ven, 11 Ave. de Scarabees, 1050 Brussels, Belgium. At least two women in each country will undertake to distribute requests for international support to all the feminist groups in their country. In addition, a separate international network to focus on the particular problems of Third World women is being formed, and both networks will work together. For further information, contact Catherine Day-Jermany, National Paralegal Institute, 2000 P Street, N.W., Suite 600, Washington, D.C. 20036.

An international lesbian communication network is being organized. For further information, contact Frances Doughty, National Gay Task Force, 80 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10001.

The women's struggle is an international one and the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women was a giant step towards recognizing and actualizing it. The memorable opening message sent by Simone de Beauvoir captures the goals of the women who attended the Tribunal and hints at the enormous task still awaiting us.

Dear Sisters,

I am deeply sorry that circumstances do not allow me to be among you today, but I am present in my heart. I hold this meeting to be a great historic event. In contrast to Mexico where women, directed by their political parties, by their nations, were only seeking to integrate Woman into a male society, you are gathered here to denounce the oppression to which women are subjected in this society.

To fight this oppression, for a long time now women have been gathering together in many countries; but these various groups were more or less ignorant of one another. For the first time they will join together, and women coming from all over the world will become conscious of the scandal of their condition. You are right to consider this condition the source of real crimes: the position imposed on women, whether under institutionalized forms or not, leads to unacceptable attacks against the human being; against these, in the vast majority of cases, there is no legal recourse. That is why it is urgent that women should mobilize themselves to combat these crimes by their own means.

Strengthened by your solidarity, you will develop defensive tactics, the first being precisely the one you will be using during these five days: talk to one another, talk to the world, bring to light the shameful truths that half of humanity is trying to cover up. The Tribunal is in itself a feat. It heralds more to come. I salute this Tribunal as being the start of a radical decolonization of women.

Simone de Beauvoir

NOTES

¹The women on this committee were: Maureen Giroux, an American living in Paris (the coordinator of ITCAW); Miriam Bazzanella from Italy; Grainne Farren, an Irish woman living in Paris; Erica Fischer from Austria; Mireya Gutierrez, a Mexican woman living in Paris; Lisbet Natland from Norway; Diana Russell from the U.S.A., and Marguerite Russell from England. The Coordinating Committee met again in September, 1975; two additions were made to this committee at that time: Lily Boeykens from Belgium and Lydia Horton, an American who lives in Brussels. The committee met again in January, 1976 and March, 1976.

²In Greece a women's movement group was started in response to the attempt of the ITCAW contact to involve Greek women in the Tribunal.

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APPENDIX

Countries Participating in the Tribunal

Australia (including an aboriginal woman)	Japan
Austria	Korea
Belgium	Luxembourg
Brazil	Mexico
Canada	Mozambique
Chile	the Netherlands Antilles
Denmark	Norway
Egypt	Philippines
England	Portugal
France	Puerto Rico
West Germany	Scotland
Greece	South Africa (including a Black woman)
Guinea	Spain
Holland	Sweden
Iceland	Switzerland
India	Syria
Iran	Taiwan
Ireland	U.S.A. (including a Native American)
Israel	Vietnam
Italy	Yemen