

Equal Rights - Equal Responsibilities
Droits Égaux - Responsabilités Égales

IAW NEWSLETTER - April 2000



Equal Rights

Dear IAW members,

*In this April Newsletter more news in the struggle for women's rights world-wide. The excellent article in IWNNews: **Is Rape an Act of Torture**, has a follow-up in the trial of the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague where, for the first time, rape and sexual enslavement has been treated as crimes against humanity. In the next IWNNews you will find a report of the Town Hall Meeting on Peace, on March 8 2000 during CSW, by IAW President Patricia Giles. Because we are not sure if all of you will receive the next IWNNews in time for the Special Session, Pat Giles has been so kind to give us a first reading of her article in this newsletter. Please have a look too at the attachment on Women as Peace Makers, saved in Word 6.0/95. If you cannot open it, tell us and we will send it by e-mail.*

The Special Session, Beijing +5 in June, features uppermost in this newsletter. We do hope many of you will attend in one or another capacity. If you are going or planning to go, please send an e-mail to Membership Secretary Pat Richardson, patgum@nvi.net.au. The EC will try if possible (!) to send one or two newsletters with (short) interviews of our IAW members covering their subjects.

And IAW Secretary Priscilla Todd will soon get a new e-mail address: toddsec@golocal.com.au

United Nations Commission on the Status of Women
Forty Fourth Session 28th February – 2nd March 2000,
Patricia Giles

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) meets annually for two weeks in March. This year's three week session was designed to act also as the Preparatory Committee for the Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly, 'Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty First Century' to be held in New York June 5-9 2000.

The 45 members of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) are elected by the Economic and Social Commission of the United Nations (ECOSOC) for four-yearly terms from among the 189 members states. The following basis currently establishes the relative regional representation: 13 from African states; 11 from Asian states: four from Eastern European states; nine from Latin American and Caribbean States and eight from Western European and other states.

When working on documents such as that intended for the Special Session in June, these 45 states caucus in three main groups. 'The 77' (traditional name for the developing states which now total over 130 members); JUSCANZ

(Japan, United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, recently joined by Norway), and the European Union. The Vatican, which has special status, is involved in negotiations but is not eligible to vote. (Participants were briefly subjected to the usual minor irritations of anti-choice demonstrations, literature and intrusive behaviour).

Other states send representatives, who can be involved in debates but are not eligible to vote. Occasionally non governmental organisations with consultative status are invited to speak during the panel discussions which precede the serious and lengthy business of amending a complex document, which has been prepared by the UN Secretariat. Its sources include reports submitted by such authorities as states, regional meetings and inter-government organisations. It is at this stage that advances, reverses, new strategies, new issues and innovative practices are recorded and their significance reflected in the text. Amending the draft to fill the expectations of all CSW members, plus the non-member states present, and the increasing number of NGOs from special issues and regional groupings can be a very slow process.

Everyone in the conference room, including the observers, is able to hear the proceedings in the six UN languages

(English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic and Russian) but the actual debate is conducted in English.

Every official delegation is under instructions from its own government and usually has little flexibility at this late stage in the proceedings. Simply finding a common position within and between the three groupings can be very difficult. This year, after two weeks, the Commission had not completed even a quarter of its work, necessitating extra meetings, which have been scheduled at the UN in New York for April and May.

NGO representatives to Commission meetings are often disappointed by the drawn-out nature of such processes, and may also feel that despite all their efforts they can perceive little in the way of immediate results. However, the undeniable advantage of being there is of vastly expanding one's own knowledge; getting to know women from every part of the world; making contacts and friends; learning how other societies treat their women; comparing strategies and planning for the future.

As Helvi Siipila, the Secretary General of the International Women's Year United Nations Conference, told the women at the Tribune in Mexico in 1975, we must take our new-found consciousness and knowledge home with us; work with our organisations, our societies and our political leaders to make them aware of the status of women world-wide; campaign for change at home and internationally, and urge member states to work together for the national and international change which only the United Nations can achieve. In short, such experience prepares us to become well-informed and effective advocates locally and globally as we seek to enhance every aspect of the status the women of the world.

This year, CSW has been no different from others. We have had the benefit of hearing excellent speakers during panel discussions; learnt much in caucuses, and tried to keep awake during the grinding slow document process. There were encouraging aspects of CSW this year. Young, vibrant and effective young women appeared in substantial numbers and certainly made their presence felt. The World Health Organisation conducted a valuable meeting on Women and Mental Health calling for examples of good practice in this neglected field. All the available meeting rooms were fully occupied by well-organised issue or regional groups; daily documents were easily available; gender issues were investigated right across the agenda and many aspects of the core themes, gender equality, development and peace were well canvassed.

One unequivocally positive experience this year was the Town Hall Meeting on Peace held on International Women's Day. One of the largest conference rooms was packed as we heard from groups such as Women in Black, survivors of the terrible Bosnia-Herzegovina conflict and individuals like the very young woman from Columbia.

The Secretary General, Kofi Annan and the High Commissioner on Human Rights Mary Robinson, both of whom are regular visitors and speakers at CSW meetings, spoke of women and children as refugees and as victims of the worst atrocities, but the big surprise of the event was when **President Chowdhury of the Security Council**

(Bangladesh) gave a speech which was headlined 'Peace Inextricably Linked with Equality Between Men and Women'.

This is believed to be the first time that the Security Council (one of today's few all-male forums of the UN) has addressed these issues. He emphasised the necessity for full access and participation of women in power structures, and their involvement in all efforts for the prevention and resolution of conflicts. While entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict, women and girls are particularly affected and the impact of violence against women and violation of the rights of women in conflict situations is experienced by women of all ages.

Members of the Security Council had noted that although women have begun to play an important role in conflict resolution, they are still under-represented and must be empowered politically and economically and represented at all levels of decision making and in all phases of hostilities, including peace-keeping, peace-making, reconciliation and reconstruction. He also addressed human rights abuses, calling for prosecution of those responsible for grave breaches of humanitarian law and stressing that efforts should be strengthened to provide assistance, protection and training to women refugees. President Chowdhury repeated this speech at CSW later that day, and issued it in full as a press release a copy of which I will gladly send on request It is also available at un.org/news, March 8th 2000.

IAW will be represented at the June meeting as will several of our affiliates which have consultative status. As a special session of the UN there will be only limited access for NGOs, but a full programme of activities is being planned by the Committee of Non Government Organisations (CONGO) about which our representative in New York, Kay Fraleigh is a reliable source of the most recent information.

email fraleighpotts@hotmail.com fax 1 212 6825354.

Special Session, BEIJING +5

This Fact Sheet contains information regarding the Beijing+5 Process. It is an effort to provide information as available. New or changed information will appear in future editions. You are urged to share this information with your fellow NGOs. We welcome other NGOs to contact us with their e-mail address, fax number, and/or mailing address so that we can add them to our contact list.

From IWTC (with thanks!)

RESUMED PREPCOM AND INTER-SESSIONAL MEETINGS

The dates for the resumed PrepCom and Inter-sessional meetings are:
20 April (Thursday)

8, 9 and 11 May (Monday, Tuesday and Thursday)

30 May – 2 June (Tuesday through Friday)

Please note: 10 May (Wednesday) is not a scheduled meeting day.

There are many activities going on in New York City during the Beijing+5 Special Session. In addition to the official UN proceedings, there are NGO events directly associated with the official proceedings and other NGO events of interest. Several different groups facilitate/organise these events. To help NGOs contact the most appropriate organisation, the following list has information about registration for the Special Session, meeting space requests, and NGO events.

US BEIJING PLUS 5 NGO HOST COMMITTEE (US NGO HOST COMMITTEE)

Facilitating educational and celebratory events at the U.S. Customs House, One Bowling Green (near Battery Park in lower Manhattan). Coordinating a Calendar of Events on their web site of Beijing+5 events occurring throughout New York City with links to the organiser's site www.beijingplus5hostcomm.com

March Prepcom and right-wing religious organisations

Right-wing religious organisations arrived in force at UN headquarters recently to participate in the Beijing+5 PrepCom. Three hundred and fifty highly-organised conservatives from seven organisations created a vocal presence during two weeks of NGO workshops, forums, strategy sessions and lobby meetings, March 6-17. As governments re-examined agreements from the historic Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the conservatives hoped to roll back important provisions, particularly on reproductive rights and gender empowerment, and to prevent any further progress in areas like sexual orientation.

One conservative group managed to register ninety 'representatives', breaking the UN record for an NGO delegation and clearly ignoring the spirit of NGO accreditation rules. Virtually all the conservatives came from North America and more than half were men, including about twenty-five robed Catholic friars from a Canadian monastery. The conservatives were united in a coalition of fundamentalist Protestants, conservative Catholics and Mormons. In the past, these groups have been hostile towards each other and towards the United Nations, but now they have adopted a strategy of joint action including participation in UN events.

The right-wing lobbyists wore big buttons proclaiming 'Motherhood' and 'The Family'. They also produced a daily newspaper. They lobbied the G-77 intensely, arguing that Northern feminists had imposed anti-family values on the rest of the world. A thousand representatives of women's rights NGOs worked to limit the damage of the right-wingers and to preserve the Beijing spirit, developing imaginative counter-strategies.

Still, the conservatives may have bogged down the negotiations. The religious Right will certainly be back at the UN for the June conference and beyond, imposing unpredictable and unwelcome changes on the role of NGOs in the world body. Governments will probably now impose formal restrictions on the number of NGO representatives, and the Secretariat may propose further curtailment of NGO rights.

Source: Liz Probert, list b5ngonews@lists.sn.apc.org You can subscribe to this list at any time by sending a blank message to B+5alerts-subscribe@igc.topica.com

Editorial comment

Although we recognise everyone's right to have her or his point of view, attempts at stalling proceedings during the Special Session cannot be tolerated. What can be done? 1) Follow the point of view of CONGO; 2) be sure there is a majority at workshop meetings before taking part in side-events; 3) ignore emotional outbursts; 4) try the personal approach if possible; 5) know the text of the Platform For Action well, for a straight from the shoulder answer ...

The Conference of NGOs (CONGO) is an international, not-for-profit membership association that facilitates the participation of NGOs in United Nations debates and decisions. Founded in 1948, CONGO's major objective is to ensure the presence of NGOs in exchanges among the world's governments and United Nations agencies on issues of global concern. For more information, contact:

CONGO, 777 United Nations Plaza, 8th Floor, New York, NY 10017, 212-986-8557 (tel) 212-986-0821 (fax) congongoo@aol.com

Women's Internet cafe closed in Saudi Arabia

The authorities in Mecca, in western Saudi Arabia, have shut down a women-only internet cafe for reasons of public morality. The cafe, near Mecca University, was closed last week after a complaint was filed in court alleging that the cafe had been used for 'immoral purposes', according to the English-language Arab News. 'What was uncovered was against both our religion and our traditions', said Brigadier Yousuf Matter of the civil police. Mecca has a large Saudi and international student population. He gave no details as to what offence had actually been committed. Internet use in Saudi Arabia has boomed in recent years, and internet cafes have become a popular place for young people to meet. Brigadier Matter said that the court had also given him permission to close other internet cafes in the city. The cafe was popular with postgraduates in the modern Aziziah suburb.

Restrictions

Mecca, Islam's holiest city, has a large Saudi and international student population that attends the university. A regular customer at the cafe said that the cafe had been misused, but did not elaborate. 'Now all of us have been barred from using the cafe', she said. There are 100,000 registered internet users in Saudi Arabia. Public internet access, through cafes and universities, is heavily restricted in terms of which websites can be viewed.

Rape treated as a crime against humanity

In a precedent-setting case, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) has, for the first time, treated rape and sexual enslavement as crimes against humanity. The trial of three Bosnian Serbs is 'a case where women and girls - some only 12 or 15 years old - were subjected to unimaginable horrors while the world was collapsing around them', declared prosecutor Dirk Ryneveld at the opening of the session. The accused, three paramilitary officers, were part of the Serbian forces that had surrounded the southwestern Bosnian city of Foca in April of 1992. Non-Serbian women were herded into a gym and several apartments were turned into brothels, where women were systematically raped and assaulted. Rape had previously been treated by the ICTY, but only as a violation of the Geneva Conventions.

Global Drive to Stop Violence

On the event of International Women's Day, UNICEF began a global campaign targeting culturally sanctioned homicidal violence against women in cultures where neither the legal system nor society protects them. The focus will be on acts of violence such as: 'honour killings', 'dowry deaths', female infanticide and acid attacks. Despite laws set up to protect women, in some societies the culture sanctions violence against women and influences the behaviour of men. In Bangladesh, reported acid attacks on women and girls increased from 47 in 1996 to more than 200 in 1998. Similarly, in India, more than 6,000 cases of 'bride burning' were reported, while 10,000 cases of female infanticide have been compiled by the U.S State Department in its latest survey on human rights.

Pinar Ilaracan, the founder of the Turkish organisation, Women for Women's Rights, has highlighted that it is wrong to simplistically refer to 'honour killings' as associated with religion in Islamic countries; instead the real factors are male dominance, patriarchy and power. The U.S laws of citizenship, which can be discriminatory, are also to be investigated in order to bring all governments to account for the agreements they signed.

Source: Barbara Crossette via Abigail's Rebels, <http://www.aviva.org/newsinex.htm>

Timbuktu Online

In the historic city of Timbuktu in Mali on the edge of the Sahara is a telecentre which is banking on an Internet connection to revitalise the city's economic life. It has attracted 2,000 visitors since it was opened in May 1998. In the Middle Ages, "Holy Timbuktu" was a beacon throughout West Africa and the Islamic world. It had 180 Madrasahs (Koranic schools) and the renowned Sankore University, which was attended by up to 25,000 students. The mosques and tens of thousands of ancient manuscripts, preserved by families and by the Ahmed Baba cultural centre, are evidence of this intense intellectual activity.

Like most people in Timbuktu, the mayor, Ibrahim Mohamed, sees the MCT (Multipurpose Community Telecentre) first as a source of the kind of knowledge needed to revive the region's stagnant social and economic life. The most encouraging MCT-based projects are being drawn up in the fields of medicine, teaching, the media, culture, agriculture and tourism. 'A group of doctors has been trained to look for information the Web', says Canadian France Henri, a Unesco consultant. 'They've already found some terrific pages about gynaecological problems. They printed them out, photocopied them and handed them out at the hospital. They'd also like to be able to get 'electronic advice' from their colleagues in Bamako [Mali's capital] and elsewhere'. 'The most urgent thing for us is to find out about other people's experiences', adds a teacher. 'Some countries have the same problems as we do, for example, in getting girls enrolled in school. We'd like to know what solutions they've found'. He suggests material from the Internet could be used to produce some good school textbooks, which are few and far between. By Sophie Boukhari (a selection), UNESCO Courier journalist.

Vale Margaret Ingledeu

It is with great sorrow that we have learned of the death of Margaret Ingledeu on 10 April. In order to do adequate justice to her long life and her many decades of intense and effective activism and her significance in the history of the International Alliance of Women since the mid-1930s, those who knew her well are preparing a comprehensive tribute which will appear in a later issue of the International Women's News. Our deepest and affectionate sympathy go to her loving sister, Barbara Mathieson.

Note: to avoid misunderstanding, we always send the IAW Newsletter twice, 1) in the body of the e-mail, and 2) as an attachment, saved in Word 6.0/95. Both have exactly the same content. The only difference is, that the attachment has a better lay-out, so it will be easy for Affiliates to copy it and send it by post to IAW members without e-mail.

Please note too that the e-mail address of IAW Secretary Priscilla Todd is going to change or maybe has changed into toddsec@golocal.com.au

NB:

We invite you to redistribute this Newsletter to IAW members without an e-mail address. Also, please advise us if you know of any IAW members or affiliate/associate organisations with an e-mail address, and in that case: please be so kind to contact Pat Richardson.

International Alliance of Women / Alliance Internationale des Femmes

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