

An End to War — An End to Violence Against Women



The committee of Soviet women has called for an international women's conference in Prague, Czechoslovakia in October 1981. This is an open letter to the committee from the women of *Courage*, a West German feminist magazine.

WE have received the appeal from the Soviet Union women's committee in which the women of the world are called upon to fight for peace. Since we also find the increasing tensions of an east-west conflict troubling—a situation instigated by Reagan's election to power, NATO's new defence measures and the continual repetitive statements of the Federal Republic of Germany administration and those of other western-European nations claiming that the Soviet Union is solely responsible for the present threat to world peace and they in turn must counter this threat through the increase in armaments—we would like to answer your letter directly herewith.

Women who are active in the autonomous feminist women's movement here in the FRG are convinced of the fact that a "limited nuclear war" could take place any time in the near future initiated by either side, that is as soon as one side seems to think they have a definite advantage over the other. The position expressed by western politicians supports this assumption. At the moment we are still living at peace here in Europe, but this peace is being used to prepare for a new war, a war which few people shall survive and which will destroy all possible conditions essential for Life on this planet. One can hardly compare the amount of destruction that resulted during the second world war (wherein women as a group suffered the most) with the destruction that a third world war will bring.

For us it is a matter of survival. We cannot take the risk of waiting until eastern and western powers have finally

come to terms and have banished various weapons from their military arsenals. In view of the impending nuclear war, it would be careless and negligent to wait any longer. The experience drawn from past wars has taught us the lesson that men should no longer have the power to pass judgment over life and death. We refuse to continue to be victims of their decisions. Therefore we must bring the power we have as women, and this means all women of all nations, to the fore, and fight for the right to pass sentence over war and peace, a right which should always have been ours in the first place. In order to do this, we must organize international women's peace councils. As long as men continue to embody the aggressive potential inherent in our societies, they should be excluded from participation within these councils for the sake of keeping peace.

You have called for an international women's conference in October of this year which will take place in Prague. We hope that the conference will not just appeal to governments, eastern or western, the governments in which more and more women have simply lost faith, but that the conference shall be a forum where we ourselves will try and solve problems, on our own, together. For example, women from the FRG autonomous women's movement put forward the following questions at the recent NATO planning group session:

What exactly prompts male governments to produce weapons in this world, so much so that the whole human race can be annihilated dozens of times?

What exactly prompts male governments to produce more bombs

than food ?

What exactly prompts male governments to increase the destructive potential of an Hiroshima bomb a million times over and this in a time span of 35 years ?

We are of the opinion that it is absolutely hopeless further to appeal to those who have been responsible for the establishment of destruction. We have also lost all hope that either opponent will eventually reduce any of these weapons through international poker games. It is necessary that we try and establish a forum of international protest. Our might is not a military one. In all of our countries, women have no influence in the political spheres. **Since we have been excluded by men from all male structures, our power consists of bringing chaos to male order. We must make use of this form of power. The threat of the so-called peaceful use of nuclear power has motivated women here in the federal republic to call for a birth strike, as a form of protest.** In the actual event of a nuclear war, that is to say if at all births were possible at such a time, the infant mortality rate and number of malformations at births would be in much greater numbers than during "peaceful" use of nuclear energy. Nurses and doctors have already declared, singly or in groups, that in case of war, the governments cannot depend on their services in tending the injured. They have made this declaration in the hope that it will in turn pressure governments to prevent nuclear war.

We have already begun to disrupt preparations of war, which we would like to refer to as the "Patriarchal Peace

Illusion”, through our extensive denial. Fighting against patriarchal order is fighting to prevent war. In our daily resistance, we need to include all forms of denial. The campaigns and strikes we have initiated against anti-abortion laws are just as much a part of our denial as the refusal to do housework, and any other form of emotional support that we do for men on the whole. As long as women continue to take care of the human sides of life, that is to say, rake the burdens from the men in being responsible for the well-being of society, men will always be in a position to concern themselves with

the destruction of life and not its preservation. A female peace, a matriarchal peace, for which we are fighting, also means an end to the commonplace violence against women to which we are subjected in our daily lives.

For this reason we appeal to you and all others, those responsible for the preparation of the Prague conference as well as all the conference participants, to keep an open forum for discussion, in order that all positions within the women’s peace movement can be heard. The conference should be open to all women wanting to attend—also to

publishers of the almanac “Women and Russia” and “Maria” who were forced to leave the Soviet Union.

After what we have recently experienced at the international women’s conference in Copenhagen, we hope the content of this conference will not be controlled or channelized by men, as it was in Copenhagen. For we can only prevent war, when we refuse to be further regimented by men. Out of the present concern we have for world peace, we have chosen to take an active part in the conference and to further make public your appeal... □

I HATE conferences because most of them are a one-way traffic from speakers to audience so I was very apprehensive about this one. At the airport, Jane and Bridget received us with an affectionate hug and kiss. I stayed with Francine and Alexandra and shared my room with Boyo, a woman from Senegal. We were made to feel at home—it was an experience I shall not forget. We spoke different languages but we did not have any communication problem—it was the language of feminism. For the first time I felt that international sisterhood is possible.

On June 4 we met other women from third world countries and visited WHO. On the 6th morning, I put up an exhibition of **Manushi** in the conference hall and the organizers warmly helped me. The conference began with women introducing themselves. There was simultaneous translation into English and French. When my turn came, I was surprised to find that I was not nervous and I spoke with conviction. I suppose seeing 500 strong, colourful women inspired me to talk. At lunch it was nice to know that a large number of women are vegetarian by choice.

The conference was organized “in view of the evolution of feminism within the worsening world situation.” It was felt that “it is only at the international level that we can better understand our situation, especially in the face of the growing world crisis.” There were three sessions, each four hours long. We were split into five workshops in each session so one was able to attend three out of 15 workshops. In the workshop on “The Politics of Self-Help” we shared our experience and found that lack of money is a common and major

problem. If health centres charge fees, the self-help idea gets lost, but if monetary help is taken from the government or other agencies, a hierarchy develops and women end up practising what they had defied. We agreed that continued practice and struggle is the only way to evolve new forms.

I also attended the workshop on “Menopause.” Norma and Kathy started by saying that they are menopausal women, and suffer from hot flashes but a little fanning of the face with a handfan is all that is required to bring immediate relief. Women from all over the world agreed that menopause brings depression because with it, the only power women are allowed to have—that of reproducing—also goes away. We are made to think that any sexuality which does not reproduce is abnormal, therefore psychological problems arise. A 60 year old French feminist felt that feminism had transformed her from an asexual being into a bisexual woman and feminism had saved her life. It was beautiful to see her glow as she spoke. It appeared that sexuality after menopause, without contraception, without fear of pregnancy, was a positive and liberating force for her. Norma said that dryness of the vagina is not a problem if women continue with sexual relations and/or masturbation. She recommends “Menopause — a positive approach” a

book by Rosetta Reitz.

There were workshops on population control and imperialism, sexuality, contraception, pregnancy, and childbirth, research by women on natural medicine, lesbian health, yoga as a method of contraception. One of the resolutions passed by the conference was in support of Brazilian woman’s struggle against censorship of a TV programme by a woman on sex information. Another demanded amnesty for all those who are on trial in Spain for having performed abortions.

The conference provided a space for women of different countries to meet each other. But there was not enough time to discuss each topic in detail. In each workshop, by the time we warmed up, the time was up and we felt that it would have been more useful to have discussed one issue at length. It emerged that all over the world women are trying to gain control over our bodies and regain our health. In developing countries it is a question of life and death because of extreme poverty. The issues at stake are food, potable water, primary health centres, more hospital beds and so on. In western countries it is a question of opening up women-controlled health care to escape from the clutches of multinational drug companies, and male dominated medical science. These struggles can only succeed if they are linked and aware of each other. □

The Politics of Self-Help

This is a report by Usha Desai who went on behalf of Manushi to attend the third international women and health conference organised by the women of Dispensaire des Femmes and ISIS in Geneva from June 6 to 8, 1981