

ENVIRONMENTAL & REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE



When Movements Join Forces

By Women's Voices for the Earth

When is the environment a women's issue? Historically, the environmental movement has widely been seen as one of conservation, wilderness preservation, and wildlife protection. But a women-centered movement has emerged that fuses environmentalism with women's health and empowerment. What has inspired such a movement? A threat to the health of our reproductive systems.

The threat looms in the form of environmental pollutants, specifically the toxic chemicals intimately impacting women's lives and the lives of our families. We're talking about chemicals that are linked to breast cancer, birth defects, children's asthma, decreased fertility, learning disabilities, children's cancer and other illnesses.

One of the most prevalent threats from toxic chemicals comes from consumer products in our own homes. Every year thousands of chemicals are placed in products and released into our environment with virtually no information

on the potential consequences for human health and little government oversight. The impact of toxic chemicals on women is of particular concern:

Women more frequently come into contact with toxic chemicals in the home. Women use a significant number of personal care products including soaps, cosmetics, and lotions—on average 12 products a day. Similarly, women frequently come into contact with chemicals in cleaning products; a national study showed that typically, women today do more than 70 percent of the housework. Both personal care products and cleaning products have been proven to contain toxic chemicals linked to chronic disease.

Women carry the impacts of toxic chemical exposure differently than men. Many chemicals build up in fat and women generally have a higher percentage of fat tissue than men.

We're seeing an increase in women's health problems potentially related to environmental chemical exposure. Over the last 70 years, breast cancer rates rose from a risk of 1 in 20 to 1 in 8; the onset of puberty is occurring at an earlier age among young girls; endometriosis, a leading cause of female infertility, is far more common today than it was 50 years ago.

Women of color in the United States bear a greater burden of chronic diseases that have been linked with exposure to toxic chemicals. Black women are more likely to die of breast cancer than are women of any other racial or ethnic group. Autoimmune diseases such as lupus affect Black women at three times the rate of white women. Black, Native American,

and Puerto Rican infants have higher death rates than Caucasian infants.

Women are the first environment for the next generation. Many chemicals stored in a woman's body are passed on to her child during pregnancy and later through breastfeeding. Although breastfeeding remains the best option for building infant immunity, synthetic chemicals are so prevalent in a woman's breast milk today that if bottled for sale, most breast milk would not pass FDA regulations.

So what are women in this modern movement doing about it?

We're raising our voices to change weak government and corporate policies that wreak havoc on our ability to keep ourselves safe. Women have incredible social, political and economic power, and we're using it.

Because of the power of our voices, corporations are beginning to make their products safer. Cleaning product companies, nail polish companies, and baby bottle companies have all recently announced the removal of toxic chemicals from their products.

And this is only the beginning.

You can add your voice to ours by joining organizations like Women's Voices for the Earth and SisterSong, organizations that are building bridges across the women's, environmental and reproductive justice movements to reach our common goals of empowering women to eliminate threats to our health.

Empower yourself. Visit www.womenandenvironment.org.