

## Endometriosis: A Reproductive and Environmental Wrong

By Mary Krane Derr

**A**s soon as I started menstruating, ferocious bursts of pain afflicted my whole body every month. But all I heard from doctors was, "It's just cramps, take some ibuprofen." What slight relief. By my 20s, I hemorrhaged and doubled up with pain for a week or more every month. I pushed myself harder and harder to go to school and work to help keep a roof over my family's heads. I knew it wasn't "just cramps,"-but what was it?

**I didn't know until I saw a newspaper article about the Endometriosis Association. It offered this checklist of symptoms:**

- Pain before and during periods
- Pain with sex
- Infertility
- Fatigue
- Painful urination during periods
- Painful bowel movements during periods
- Other gastrointestinal upsets such as diarrhea, constipation, nausea

So much of that sounded like my life. But wasn't endometriosis an infertility problem? Women of color of all races and ethnicities, and sexual orientations have highly varied plans and hopes for their wombs.

And there was something else, something deeply appalling and outrageous to me. Since the 1990s, scientific evidence has increasingly linked endometriosis to the class of eco poisons known as "endocrine

disruptors." The chief culprits are dioxin and PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), a class of dioxin-like chemicals still in the environment though outlawed during the 1970s. Many women with endometriosis, including me, also have other disorders tied to this class of chemicals, including asthma, allergies and chemical sensitivities, and recurrent yeast infections.

Dioxin remains highly prevalent around the historically industrial cities of the Great Lakes, including my hometown. And which women receive the heaviest exposures to these compounds? Women who live closest to current or defunct industrial sites. Frequently meaning: low-income women and women of color. Might it be that women from these particular walks of life actually are more prone to endometriosis? And if this is true-are they underdiagnosed and undertreated because of health education and care disparities?

Endometriosis is not just a disease that happens, and that to only a few. It afflicts the spectrum of womankind. It is inseparable from very large issues of reproductive and environmental injustice. And no woman should have to suffer it, especially in the isolation, lack of knowledge, and disempowerment I once did.

For more information about the Endometriosis Association, visit them at <http://www.endometriosisassn.org>.