

What's at Stake: Environment/Toxic Chemicals

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There's no denying that the environment impacts us all—women, men, and children. But environmental dangers impact women in disproportionate and significant ways.

While there are many examples of environmental threats, one of the most pervasive is the threat posed from toxic chemicals. It's critical that women's voices be heard at the ballot box and in public debate if we are to win the protections necessary to keep ourselves and our families safe.

Infertility, early puberty, breast and childhood cancers, asthma, abnormalities in brain development, ADHD and other learning and behavioral disorders have all increased in the United States in recent years. More and more evidence implicates that some of these increases are linked to our constant exposure to toxic chemicals, from the air we breathe, to the water we drink, to the everyday products we bring into our homes.ⁱ

As Women's Voices for the Earth points out, it is estimated that between 80,000 and 85,000 chemicals are currently in use in United States, but only about 200 of these chemicals have been tested for safety. Most of those that have been tested have only been evaluated for their impact on men in industrial settings. As a result, very little is known about chemical exposure routes and health impacts on women and especially on girls, women of color, and women of reproductive age.ⁱⁱ

While everyone is exposed on a daily basis to toxic chemicals in the environment, women also interact with certain products at higher levels and in different ways than men, thus increasing our exposure. Surveys show that women are significantly greater users than men of personal care products like soaps, cosmetics, and lotions with women using an average of nine personal care products each day, exposing themselves to a mixture of over 100 individual chemicals. 25% of women (but only one in a hundred men, or 1%) report using an average of 15 products daily.

Women also face higher exposure to potentially hazardous cleaning chemicals. While gender roles have changed over time, a national study showed that women are still doing over 70% of the housework in the average home. Unfortunately there is little regulation determining what kinds of chemicals can be used in these products creating the possibility of a variety of toxic exposures. These small daily exposures can lead to chemicals building up in women's bodies, which add up over a lifetime of use.ⁱⁱⁱ

In addition, women tend to dominate in certain professions that place them at high risk for chemical exposure. Housekeepers and nail salon workers are exposed on a daily basis to chemicals noted for causing health problems. These occupations are also dominated by women of color who experience disproportionate exposure in a variety of ways.

Women of color bear a greater burden of chronic diseases that have been linked with exposure to toxic chemicals. In addition to the toxic chemicals they come into contact with along with the general population, women of color are more likely to be exposed to particularly toxic chemicals contained in personal care products marketed to women of color including skin lighteners and hair relaxers. They are also more likely to live in neighborhoods with commercial hazardous waste facilities.

Pregnant and nursing women are another population particularly vulnerable to the impact of toxic chemicals which pass through the placenta and through breast milk posing risks for both mother and child.^{iv}

Safer options exist for use in everyday products, but US manufacturers are not required to use them. In fact, current law doesn't even require manufacturers to disclose what chemicals their products contain—making it impossible for consumers to choose safer options.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, we all have some levels of these chemicals in our bodies. No matter how hard we try to avoid them, potentially harmful exposures will remain unless we change federal policy to require safer chemical production and tighter regulation of what goes into our air and water.^v

Women's voices are powerful on these issues. We are the primary consumer decision makers in 85% of all United States households, making us a very powerful consumer group that can persuade corporations to change their ways. We are also the primary health care decision makers in most of our families, so we know first-hand the importance of preventing long-term health impacts on our families.^{vi}

Our voices are powerful, but nothing will change unless we use them at the ballot box to speak out for a safer environment for us all.

For more information about why women should care about the environment, please visit:

The Safer Chemicals, Healthy Families Coalition at <http://www.saferchemicals.org/>

Women's Voices for the Earth at <http://www.womensvoices.org/>

ⁱ <http://www.saferchemicals.org/>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.womensvoices.org/about/why-a-womens-organization/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.womensvoices.org/about/why-a-womens-organization/>

^{iv} <http://www.womensvoices.org/about/why-a-womens-organization/>

^v <http://www.saferchemicals.org/>

^{vi} <http://www.womensvoices.org/about/why-a-womens-organization/>