

# Ecofeminism: Women and the Environment

## *What is Ecofeminism?*

While there is no central definition of ecofeminism, it is generally regarded as a feminist approach to environmental ethics. Ecofeminists see the oppression of women and the domination of nature as interconnected; as a movement, ecofeminist theorists use a framework that confronts issues of gender, race, class, and nature.

## *Why Care?*

It is important to be aware of how environmental policies, or a lack thereof, influence our everyday lives. Women, children, low-income individuals, people of color, and residents of the Global South are particularly vulnerable populations whose rights to a healthy and sustainable future must be vigilantly respected and safeguarded. As we are all only as healthy as our earth, we must be mindful of how our lives positively or negatively impact the environment, and ultimately, ourselves. Women and the status of the environment are inextricably linked. In many cases, it is women, in the U.S. and across the globe, who primarily feel the effects of ecological change and the creation of toxic substances by humans.

### **Rising Breast Cancer Rates**

The rate of cancer is growing exponentially; breast cancer is the leading cause of cancer death among U.S. women aged 35-44. Today, as many as 50% of breast cancer cases remain unexplained by personal characteristics and other traditionally-accepted risk factors. Epidemiologists and other scientists increasingly believe many cases are linked to environmental factors. While African American women have the highest death rate from breast cancer, European American women have the highest incidence of breast cancer. Breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer among Latinas.<sup>1</sup>

### **Cosmetics and Personal Care Products**

For many of us, putting on makeup, dying our hair, or using lotions is just a part of our daily routine. Consumers should know that ingredients in personal care products range from essentially harmless components to chemicals that are known carcinogens, or cancer-causing substances. While there may only be a few ingredients that are dangerous, many people use multiple products a day. According to a study by the Environmental Working Group, the average adult uses 9 personal care products each day, with 126 unique chemical ingredients. More than a quarter of all women and one of every 100 men use at least 15 products daily. With the absence of adequate government oversight for this \$35 billion industry, consumers are the losers.<sup>2</sup>

### **Motherhood and Pregnancy**

Women might not be aware of how our lifestyles affect our reproductive health. A 2001 Centers for Disease Control study found that ten percent of reproductive-age American women already carry so much mercury in their blood that if they got pregnant it could pose a threat of neurological damage to the fetus. Each year, approximately 60,000 children are born at a significantly increased risk of neurological

effects from mercury because of the contaminated fish their mothers ate.<sup>3</sup> Mercury is not the only chemical substance that can detrimentally affect reproduction. Manufactured chemical by-products like dioxin are a key factor in cancers as well as in reproductive health problems such as infertility and endometriosis.

### **Plastics**

Plastics contain xenoestrogens which can have devastating effects on the body's estrogen receptors. Estrogen's natural function is to stimulate cell growth, especially in regard to a female's secondary sex characteristics. However, excess estrogen contributes to unnatural growth. American women have the highest levels of estrogen in the world, and this may be due to the preponderance of xenoestrogens in our daily life. Xenoestrogens are found in plastic products such as food wrap and soda bottles, as well as in growth hormones common in milk/meat production and in agricultural pesticides. The chemical has been linked to migraine headaches, hormonal imbalances, and cancers.<sup>4</sup>

### **International Family Planning (IFP)**

International family planning allows people to freely and responsibly decide the number and spacing of their children. In addition to saving women's lives through more comprehensive health care, IFP services help reduce global population rates. Studies show that the average number of children a woman will have in her lifetime rapidly declines when there are improved child survival rates, higher education levels, and viable, voluntary family planning policies. Unprecedented and explosive global population growth has already taken its toll on the environment; one-third to one-half of the Earth's land surface has been transformed and 80% of original forests degraded. A sustainable future for both people and the planet means slowing population growth and improving the social economic and economic well being of people worldwide.<sup>5</sup>

## 10 Ecofeminism Facts You Show Know:

- Studies by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in January 2003 show that Americans of all ages carry a body burden of at least 116 chemicals, some of them banned for more than two decades because of toxicity.<sup>6</sup>
- As recently as sixty years ago, a woman's lifetime risk for breast cancer was 1 in 22. Today, it is 1 in 7.<sup>7</sup>
- 89% of 10,500 ingredients used in personal care products have not been evaluated for safety by the Cosmetic Ingredient Review (CIR), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), or any other publicly accountable institution. In its 67-year history of monitoring cosmetic safety, the FDA has banned or restricted just nine personal care product ingredients.<sup>8</sup>
- Endometriosis occurs when tissue resembling the lining of the uterus is found outside the uterus, which may lead to infertility. The Endometriosis Association studied a colony of rhesus monkeys that had developed endometriosis after exposure to dioxin, a toxic chemical byproduct of pesticide manufacturing, bleached pulp/paper products, and medical and municipal waste incineration. 79% of the monkeys developed endometriosis; the more dioxin exposure, the more severe the endometriosis.<sup>9</sup>
- The U.S. is home to only 5% of the global population but uses over 25% of the world's resources.<sup>10</sup>
- Today, one in four Americans lives within four miles of a toxic waste dump; this is roughly 70 million Americans, including 10 million children. Overwhelmingly, waste facilities are built in African American, Latino, and Native American communities.<sup>11</sup>
- Children have higher metabolic rates and a higher proportionate intake of food and liquid than adults. Consequently, an adult will absorb 10% of ingested lead, while a toddler will absorb 50% of ingested lead.<sup>12</sup>
- In every one of the 44 major metropolitan areas in the United States, African Americans are more likely than European Americans to be exposed to higher concentrations of toxins in the air they breathe.<sup>13</sup>
- While research has shown that agricultural productivity increases significantly when women farmers have access to land and technology, women own less than two percent of all land.<sup>14</sup>
- Men have experienced a 50% reduction in sperm count during the last fifty years.<sup>15</sup>

## Take Action! Some ways to make change...

- Research products you use to find out if they contain chemicals that may be carcinogenic or otherwise harmful. Help hold corporations accountable!
- Contact public officials and encourage them to support the research of environment-related causes of increasingly common diseases.
- Make sure that your campus community recycles and uses non-disposable utensils and containers in the cafeteria, when possible.
- Lobby your school's administration to research the use of toxin-free cleaning supplies and organic food.

<sup>1</sup> Breast Cancer Fund, <http://www.breastcancerfund.org/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=kwKXLdPaE&b=70679&ct=90345>

<sup>2</sup> Environmental Working Group, [http://www.ewg.org/reports/skindeep/report/executive\\_summary.php](http://www.ewg.org/reports/skindeep/report/executive_summary.php)

<sup>3</sup> Environmental Working Group, <http://www.ewg.org/reports/FocusPocus/>

<sup>4</sup> Women for Women, <http://www.womentowomen.com/LIBendometriosis.asp>

<sup>5</sup> National Wildlife Federation, [http://www.nwf.org/nwfwebadmin/binaryVault/IFP\\_8-031.pdf](http://www.nwf.org/nwfwebadmin/binaryVault/IFP_8-031.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> The Breast Cancer Fund, [http://www.breastcancerfund.org/atf/cf/{DE68F7B2-5F6A-4B57-9794-AFE5D27A3CFF}/sov\\_low.pdf](http://www.breastcancerfund.org/atf/cf/{DE68F7B2-5F6A-4B57-9794-AFE5D27A3CFF}/sov_low.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> The Breast Cancer Fund, <http://www.breastcancerfund.org/site/pp.asp?c=kwKXLdPaE&b=84664>

<sup>8</sup> Environmental Working Group, [http://www.ewg.org/reports/skindeep/report/executive\\_summary.php](http://www.ewg.org/reports/skindeep/report/executive_summary.php)

<sup>9</sup> Endometriosis Association, <http://www.endometriosisassn.org/endo.html>

<sup>10</sup> National Wildlife Federation, <http://www.nwf.org/resourceLibrary/getData.cfm?officeID=15D39898-FEF7-0077-300221CD0852182F&catID=3E49EA95-9595-6421-88F16095601BBB8B&pageID=5BFA3D40-65BF-09FE-BAE61ED50A26EF6C>

<sup>11</sup> Senate Democratic Policy Committee Website, [http://democrats.senate.gov/dpc/dpc-doc.cfm?doc\\_name=tp-108-2-129](http://democrats.senate.gov/dpc/dpc-doc.cfm?doc_name=tp-108-2-129)

<sup>12</sup> Children's Environmental Health Network, <http://www.cehn.org/cehn/WhatIsPEH.html>

<sup>13</sup> Inter Press Service News Agency, <http://www.ipsnews.net/interna.asp?idnews=24763>

<sup>14</sup> Women's Environment & Development Organization, [http://www.wedo.org/files/common\\_ground.pdf](http://www.wedo.org/files/common_ground.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> <http://womenshealth.about.com/cs/azhealthtopics/a/envtoxrephealth.htm>