WOMEN'S VOICES FOR THE EARTH

OUR HEALTH. OUR FUTURE. TOXIC FREE.

ROAD MAP TO A TOXIC FREE FUTURE

Three-Year Strategic Plan | 2013-2015

ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS
DECEMBER 2012

ABOUT WOMEN'S VOICES FOR THE EARTH

MISSION

Women's Voices for the Earth amplifies women's voices to eliminate the toxic chemicals that harm our health and communities.

HISTORY

Women's Voices for the Earth (WVE) was formed by a group of visionary women leaders in Missoula, Montana in 1995. Seeing that many environmental organizations at the time failed to include women in leadership positions and did not fully recognize the systemic connections between health, class, race, and the environment, WVE sought to create a new environmental organization led by women.

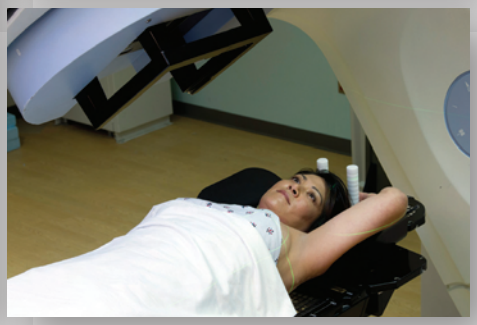
GOAL

WVE aims to eliminate toxic chemicals most intimately impacting women's lives and the lives of their families – toxic chemicals that are the causes of breast cancer, birth defects, children's asthma, women's reproductive health problems, learning disabilities, and other illnesses.

VISION

WVE envisions a world where women lead to create a healthy environment without toxic chemicals in our workplaces, homes, and communities.

ISSUE BACKGROUND



Currently, there are 80,000-85,000 chemicals registered for commercial use in the U.S., yet only a small fraction have been adequately evaluated for safety. Of the chemicals that have been tested, very few have any data on human exposures or impacts.[1] Of those, most have been evaluated largely for their impacts to adult males.[2] The chemical exposure routes and health impacts on women – especially girls, women of color, women workers, and women of reproductive age – are specific and have historically been largely overlooked by the research community.[3] This has resulted in an enormous cost to women's health and wellbeing.

Over the last 70 years, breast cancer rates have risen 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 50 years ago. Research shows that exposure to environmental toxins is playing an increasingly significant role.

Women are frequently exposed to toxic chemicals in the home through personal care products, cleaning products and other household items. Occupational exposure in industries dominated by women also results in disproportionate chemical exposure. For example, women account for up to 97% of the nail salon industry's workforce and 89% of maids and housekeeping cleaners in the U.S. – the majority of whom are women of color and immigrant women.

Yet, even as evidence mounts linking toxins in the environment and in consumer products to risks to human health, the chemical industry spends millions to hide the truth and maintain the status quo. The industry and its allies in Congress are working with deep pockets to gut environmental regulations, roll back worker safety and health protections, cut funding for health research, and terminate programs that support low-income communities altogether. If successful, the impacts of these measures will be borne on the backs of the nation's most vulnerable communities and increasingly impact both public health and the environment.

In order to overcome the significant corporate influence on the public and policymakers, WVE is building a movement of women – as workers, consumers, advocates, daughters, mothers, and grandmothers from all backgrounds and walks of life – to rise up and change the systems that disproportionately harm women by allowing corporations to use unregulated toxic chemicals in their products and manufacturing processes, with little regard for human health or the environment.

1 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (1998) Chemical Hazard Data Availability Study: What do we really know about the safety of high production volume chemicals? USEPA Office of Pollution Prevention and Toxics. (April 1998).

2 Figa-Talamanca, I. (2006) Occupational risk factors and reproductive health of women. Occupational Medicine. Vol. 56, pp: 521-531.

3 Institute of Medicine (2001) Exploring the Biological Contributions to Human Health. Does Sex Matter? Committee on Understanding the Biology of Sex and Gender Differences. National Academy Press, Washington DC. 2001.

CORE GOALS

SOUND SCIENCE:
Promote sound scientific research that addresses the unique impacts toxic chemical exposures have on women's health. WVE analyzes and synthesizes current research with an eye towards women's health and promotes additional research that will benefit women's health.

CORPORATE ACCOUNTABILITY:
Urge corporations to be transparent about the chemicals they use in their products and to remove harmful chemicals and replace them with safer alternatives. WVE believes that corporations should always use the safest chemicals available. Acknowledging that chemicals enter air, water, food, and the human body from a multitude of sources, chemicals should be assessed based on their inherent ability to cause harm rather than on the potential for risk in one particular controlled situation.

POLICY ADVOCACY:
Ensure women's health is prioritized in environmental and public health policy and regulatory decisions. In these decisions, WVE advocates for the Wingspread Statement on the Precautionary Principle[4], which states "when an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically." WVE aims to secure policies and regulations that protect the most vulnerable human populations.

WOMEN AS LEADERS:
Engage women as leaders in the public sphere, in order to build a stronger, more diverse environmental movement. Research shows that while women tend to place greater value on environmental protection, their behavior tends to focus on actions within the private sphere (such as recycling) instead of public actions like petitioning or protesting. WVE aims to move women from the private sphere to the public sphere, ensuring that women's values and priorities are reflected in environmental policy making.

MOVEMENT BUILDING:
Connect various stakeholders from a diverse background of fields, including environmental health and justice, reproductive health and justice, workers' rights, and human rights, in order to build a more diverse and robust environmental movement. In order to ensure that the policy solutions we promote benefit all people, WVE works across various movements to gain valuable insight and bring diverse perspectives into advocacy and program work.

4 The Wingspread statement on the precautionary principle was written by an international group of academics, scientists and environmentalists in 1998 to find a way to implement the principle and explore those three elements of scientific uncertainty, the plausibility of harm and precautionary action.

APPROACH

Raising Women's Voices

WVE firmly believes that the world we envision will come about because women are leaders in creating the policies this world needs to exist. As such, WVE aims to:

- Provide women with scientific information and the advocacy tools they need to call for change;
- Promote women's voices in the media and among policymakers; and
- Build community among women and organizations to create the environments needed to achieve broad-scale social change.

It is our vision that, because of this work, tens of thousands of women become advocates, calling on companies to make safer products and calling on government to ensure products are safe before they are allowed on the market.

Science & Research on Women's Environmental Health

WVE believes that the impact toxic chemicals have on women's health has been under examined by the research and regulatory communities. Given this, WVE incorporates the best available science throughout all of our programs. Specifically, we aim to:

- Ensure each of WVE's campaigns is based on the most current and peer-reviewed research; and
- To catalyze critical new research by the scientific and regulatory communities into specific chemicals, products and health problems women face as a result of toxic chemical exposure.

It is our vision that, as a result of WVE's research, analysis, and advocacy, the public is made better aware of the specific health impacts women face as a result of toxic chemical exposure. Government agencies, policy makers, and corporations place this topic on their agendas and begin to identify solutions for addressing these inequities as a result.

PROGRAMS

Safe Cleaning Products Initiative

Background: Women are disproportionately impacted by exposure to toxic chemicals in cleaning products. Studies show that women still do more than 70% of the housework in the average home. In addition, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in 2011 that of the 1.4 million people working in the "maids and housekeeping cleaners" industry, nearly 90% were female. Nationally, nearly 40% of housekeeping cleaners are Hispanic/Latino, while 16.5% are Black/African-American. The impact of toxic chemicals on women is of particular concern since many chemicals stored in a woman's body are passed on to her child during pregnancy and later through breast-feeding.

Goal: To reduce women's exposure to toxic chemicals by removing harmful chemicals in cleaning products and labeling all product ingredients.

Strategies:

- Lead campaigns targeting major cleaning product companies that urge the removal of carcinogens, mutagens, and reproductive toxicants from products and demand full ingredient transparency.
- Engage a broad cross-section of stakeholders and organizations in this work, including cleaning workers, worker's rights and women's rights organizations, and industry allies.
- Advance state or national regulations or legislation regarding cleaning products in order to ensure that protection of women's health from toxic exposure is prioritized.

Vision of Success: Because of WVE's work, all cleaning product companies start to disclose their ingredients on the product label. Additionally, several major manufacturers commit to removing all carcinogens, mutagens, and reproductive toxins from their products, paving the way for a complete industry overhaul and successful regulatory changes. As a result, millions of household consumers and cleaning workers are no longer exposed to a multitude of chemicals that could harm their health.

Secret Scents Campaign

Background: Currently, fragrance is a broad category used to describe the scent of a product. In fact, the fragrance is often made up of hundreds of different ingredients, many of which are known or suspected to cause health problems. Women, in particular, are more likely to suffer adverse effects. Chemicals of concern found in fragrance, such as synthetic musks and phthalates, have been linked to hormone disruption, which can have significant lifelong effects on reproductive health and development, particularly when exposure occurs during critical times such as pregnancy. Yet, current law allows the ingredients used in fragrance to be kept secret from the public.

Goal: To protect women's health by reducing exposure to hidden hazards in fragrance ingredients.

Strategies:

- Lead campaigns that compel the fragrance industry to move beyond secret ingredients.
- Provide scientific information to the public about hidden hazards of fragrance ingredients and available alternatives.
- Advance state or national regulations or legislation where fragrance ingredients are involved in order to ensure that protection of women's health from toxic exposure is prioritized.

Vision of Success: WVE has played a significant role in creating the new paradigm where fragrance manufacturers no longer enjoy blanket confidential business information claims for all fragrance ingredients. Hazardous fragrance ingredients and allergens are now listed on the labels of cleaning products and cosmetics and are examined by federal regulatory agencies. As a result of increased disclosure efforts, companies have started reformulating their products to avoid disclosing any potentially harmful ingredients, replacing them with safe alternatives. Women can more readily enjoy safe fragranced products as the manufacturing of and marketplace for these products has increased.

PROGRAMS

Safe and Healthy Salons

Background: On a daily basis, for long hours, salon workers handle solvents, glues, polishes, dyes, hair straighteners, and other beauty care products containing a multitude of chemicals known or suspected to cause cancer, allergies, respiratory, neurological and reproductive harm. Women working in salons are increasingly reporting acute health concerns such as headaches, dizziness, rashes and breathing difficulties in addition to more serious problems such as miscarriages, birth defects, cancers and respiratory illnesses; evidence is mounting that links exposure to specific chemicals (or combination of chemicals) found in salon products to these poor health outcomes. Current law fails to protect salon workers and consumers alike from being exposed to numerous dangerous chemicals, including carcinogens, reproductive toxins, and mutagens.

Goal: To improve the health of salon workers and patrons by removing hazardous chemicals from salon products.

Strategies:
- Lead market-based campaigns that highlight particularly egregious salon products and urge the FDA to effectively regulate the use of those products.
- Mobilize salon workers and consumers to advocate for federal policies that will regulate personal care and salon products.
- Analyze and synthesize existing research on salon product health and safety and disseminate widely through reports, fact sheets, and other educational materials to raise awareness among workers, the public and policymakers.

Vision of Success: The serious health problems faced by salon workers, which were once low priority for federal agencies and policy makers, is now a prominent topic among the public and policymakers. Key agencies regulating salon products and workplace safety, including the Food and Drug Administration and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, are using existing statutory authority to limit the use of dangerous salon products, thereby resulting in improved health outcomes for salon workers and patrons alike. Salon workers themselves have played an integral role in achieving these successes through civic participation and advocacy.

Safe Feminine Care Products

Background: Feminine care products are a rarely spoken of but commonly used product category familiar to all women. The most popularly used products in the category are tampons and menstrual pads, and other products in the category – douches, sprays, washes, and wipes – are used by a smaller percentage of women, with use rates considerably higher among African-American, Latina and low-income women. Like many products, the Food and Drug Administration does not require companies to test for harmful chemicals nor do they require companies to disclose all of the ingredients used in the products. Yet, initial research shows that these products contain a variety of toxic chemicals that have been linked to reproductive health problems.

Goal: To protect and improve women's reproductive health by eliminating toxic chemicals from use in feminine care products.

Strategies:
- Educate women, the public, and policymakers about toxic chemicals used in feminine care products.
- Lead campaigns that seek to shift the marketplace towards safer products.
- Partner with research agencies to catalyze further research into this area and partner with reproductive health, rights, and justice groups in order to broaden the base of women calling for non-toxic feminine care products in the marketplace.

Vision of Success: WVE's work has significantly raised awareness on the taboo issue of toxic chemicals in feminine care products. This topic is now on the agendas of major corporations, important federal agencies like the FDA and the Office of Women's Health, among reproductive and environmental health and justice advocates, and in the public eye. As a result, women are seeking out safer alternatives and corporations are responding by reformulating with safe ingredients. Importantly, this campaign has also engaged younger women just as they began to develop brand identities, resulting in a new generation of women's health advocates demanding safer products.

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