

LITERACY CORNER

WOMEN, CHILDREN & THE ENVIRONMENT: Simple Tips For Protection

Environmental hazards are such bacteria and disease that are unhealthy not only for the environment but for the inhabitants, so we must take adequate caution to avoid being caught in the web of the effects. A clean environment translates into a healthy lifestyle and life span; therefore we must sustain the purity of our physical environment.

It is common knowledge that an unhealthy environment creates environmental problems. Environmental problems with potential short and long term impacts on the environment itself (the ecosystem, flora and fauna) and the human habitats. With regards to the humans, the impacts differ and in most cases reports (World Bank, Undp, UNICEF amongst others) have shown that women and children are the most vulnerable.

Women and children are considered as the most susceptible to environmental hazards which lead to a myriad of diseases. Reason being that they interact more with the environment in so many ways whether it is in the search for food, or in the performance of household chores or even during recreation. Thus, it is canvassed that women and children need exercise extra care in the course of their interaction with the environment. This application of caution it is believed may just be the ray of hope for the woman or child that may be exposed to the real or likely impacts of the

environmental hazards within their environment. Below are some tips:

- Take steps must be taken to avoid exposure to potentially harmful substances and conditions such as household chemicals i.e. cleaning substances, insecticides, paints, etc;
- if you are pregnant, avoid unpasteurized milk products, this causes Listeriosis which leads to miscarriage, infection of the new born or still birth. So mothers should avoid such milk or milk products;
- Reduce and or avoid fish & seafood: Methyl-mercury is found in some fish and seafood and can adversely affect the fetus. Women should limit fresh/frozen tuna;
- Avoid exposure to Insect Repellent: Due to risk of West Nile Virus, a Lyme disease, it is important to take precautions to avoid exposure to mosquitoes & ticks. Methods to avoid bites include wearing protective clothing, limiting time spent outdoors at dawn & dusk and using an insect repellent;
- Avoid and or reduce incidents of indoor pollution;
- Keep immediate surrounding clean to prevent breeding by vectors and other bacteria;
- Making proper use of water.



Keep It Clean

"...act now! Your support for the environment counts".

Environmental Tit-Bits

NEWS AND GLOBAL ACTION ON THE REGULATION AND MANAGEMENT OF E-WASTE

UN Conference to Tackle Growing Problem of 'E-Waste'

Billed as the largest global environmental meeting since Copenhagen, a UN summit in Bali this week will focus on the growing threat in the developing world through discarded electronics such as computers.

A report by the United Nations published on Monday warned that developing countries face increasing environmental and health hazards from electronic waste. The report's release is timed to coincide with a week-long UN conference in Bali, Indonesia, on the topic which brings together officials and environmentalists from more than 100 countries.

Called 'Recycling - from E-Waste to Resource,' the UN report said that China already produced more than 2.3 million tons of e-waste a year - second only to the US - and had also become a dumping ground for waste from other countries.

It warned that without immediate action to ensure safe and proper collection and disposal of materials, many developing countries 'face the specter of hazardous e-waste mountains with serious consequences for the environment and public health.'

The report said the problem could worsen in the next 10 years with sales of electronic devices set to rise sharply, particularly in China and India.

'Managing this waste has become not just important, it has become absolutely urgent,' Achim Steiner, executive director of the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) said in a news conference.

NOT A NEW PROBLEM, BUT A GROWING ONE

It's not the first time that e-waste has been the focus of a major UN summit. Nor is the issue new. Reports of children toiling away in inhuman and dangerous scrap yards in the developing world to strip down computers, refrigerators, vacuum cleaners and mobile phones from industrialized nations and extract parts that can be sold on the high street have made headlines for several years.

The job involves exposure to a number of toxic chemicals such as mercury and lead and acids, which are used in the process of extraction, and then often dumped into the soil from where they enter the groundwater.

Experts say exposure to chemicals from e-waste - including lead, cadmium, mercury, chromium and polybrominated biphenyls - could damage the brain and nervous system, affect the kidneys and liver, and cause birth defects.

The reports and campaigning by environmental groups have spurred a flurry of international agreements to regulate the global trade in hazardous waste.

More than 150 countries have signed up to the UN Basel Convention, an international treaty which came into effect in 1992 and aims to minimize the generation and movement of electronic waste across borders.

Companies in western nations that have ratified the Convention - only the US has not ratified - cannot export non-working computer equipment unless they go through a complex government-level process. This is supposed to ensure the waste will be disposed of properly in the importing country.

(There is a fundamental question that needs to be asked: What happens to a laptop or PC equipments when it gets replaced with an upgrade?)

But that hasn't happened. Experts say that, as with so many well-intentioned agreements, many of the regulations in the treaty are not implemented and remain confined to paper.

'E-waste is still exported by industrialized nations to developing countries in complete violation of international law,' Benjamin Bongardt, an expert on electronic waste at the Berlin-based environmental organization NABU told Deutsche Welle.

He said there was a 'flourishing waste black market' in Europe with some firms dodging the laws by labelling their waste as 'second-hand.'

'It's simply cheaper for some waste disposal companies in the West to rent a container, stuff it with discarded electronics and send it for 'recycling' to Asia and Africa.'

Building A Sustainable Community Through The Empowerment of Women As Environmental Managers In Africa

The role of women in sustaining the environment is very crucial. This is consequent upon the fact that women depend on the environment for their daily needs such as water, fuel, food etc. They not only endure the worst of environmental degradation, but also play a vital role in environmental management. The issues that pose challenges are worrisome as they reduce the quality of the life of women, children and the entire human population in affected areas.

Women are generally the end users of the environmental output and come in direct contact with the ecosystem. In the oil bearing communities, women produce about 90% of food; collect and manage domestic fuels, farmland product and water. They engage in agro-processing and marketing of produce in order to earn income to meet the needs of their families. Thus, they are the most susceptible to the slightest threat to the ecosystem and bear its impact socially, economically and health wise.

With environmental challenges on the rise, women are becoming more vulnerable to factors that alter their habitat and invariably expose them to various health risks. Further, it is becoming increasingly clear that most of the diseases and other health problems arising from environmental degradation in the African continent impact on the health of women and children. Over 80% of diseases in the third world countries are environmentally related, while water-borne diseases kill at least 2,500 people on a daily basis. Meanwhile, the impact is felt more on the large majority of water collectors in Africa who are women and most of the time women and their young female children; the male children are expected to work on the farms.

The viewpoint is that women experience immense physical strains in the process of collection of water. Many of them have lost considerable amount of hair by constantly carrying heavy water loads for several kilometers per day. The amount of physical and mental stress they experience is hardly documented. These added hardships are often induced by environmental degradation. Most women in Africa regard the burden of water collection as their number one domestic burden as even pregnant and lactating mothers are not spared in the burden of water collection.

It is obvious therefore that women and their babies who are carried with them have to cover more and more distances, expend more time, experience more physical strains



and stress in search of drinkable and often polluted water due to oil spillages. This continuous environmental degradation induced by dumping of industrial waste products (fluorine, solid waste, hydrocarbons, sulfates and ammonia) and oil drilling activities often force women to cover greater distances in search of unpolluted traditional water sources. Thus, the poor accessibility to portable water imposes physical and possibly mental stress on females (including pregnant and nursing mothers). The impact of environmental hazards/degradation on the livelihood of women and children can not be overemphasized.

It is widely believed that every human activity manipulating the environment for gain always imposes a heavy burden on the environment. This is the major reason for the introduction of the principle of Sustainable development which is to examine the strategies that we can establish to avoid destroying "ourselves".

Sustainable Development seeks to meet the needs and the aspirations of the present

without compromising the needs of the future. It is the process in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological developments and institutional changes are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potentials to meet human needs and aspirations.

Sustainable Development, it is believed can be achieved through the adoption of an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) which is a formal study process used to predict the environmental consequences of a proposed major development project. It is also an acceptable unique environmental management technique that will examine how intending projects may cause harm to people, their homelands and livelihoods and to other nearby developments.

The foregoing indicates that women have a vital role to play in achieving the requirement of such concepts as Environmental Impact Assessment which is expected to be strictly adhered to before activities with real or likely impacts to the environment maybe embarked on. This position is buttressed by the provision of Agenda 21 (United Nations 1992A, Chapter 24) which focuses on the impact of environmental degradation on women and encourages empowerment of women as environmental managers.

In conclusion, to enhance the participation of women in environmental management for sustainable development, issues which have to be addressed include the isolation of women from decision making on matters affecting the environment. Women should be encouraged to participate in, and also chair committees on environmental protection projects and policies to address gender imbalances in decision making. In achieving this, the government will have a major role to play by ensuring gender equity and access to and control of the required resources.

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NATURAL RESOURCES DEGRADATION: Impacts On Women And Children

Natural Resources are gifts of nature such as air, land, water, forest, wildlife, topsoil, minerals, used by people for production or for direct consumption (Wikipedia). Natural Resources can be either renewable such as wood or non renewable such as minerals. They are the totality of the environment. Yet, Man in his quest for selfish and artificial comfort has ignored their sanctity and has unrepentantly continued to deplete them.

Human societies everywhere are closely linked to their natural surroundings and there has been massive destruction of Natural Resources across the globe. The world is believed to be kept in equilibrium which is based on a working balance amongst the constituent natural resources and dilapidation of one of these resources would automatically impact on others, which ultimately will create a shift in the global environmental balance. There have been so many hue and cries over the way natural resources are being utilised by humans yet evolving results indicate that too much lip service is paid to the campaigns for the need to mitigate and or eradicate the persistent abuse of these resources. Man has ignored the sanctity of natural resources and in his quest for selfish and artificial comfort engages in activities that destroy agents of natural comfort.

Over exploitation of our natural resources has begun to take its toll on the environment what with so much activities causing potential harm to the environment going on. The results however is the attendant impacts on the quality of life of the people both in the urban and the rural areas; with more adverse impacts on women and children...

WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN THE FACE OF NATURAL RESOURCES DEGRADATION

World bank and UNDP reports have shown that women and children particularly in developing nations bear the brunt of the most adverse effects of the negative aspects of human activities on the environment. The likely rationale for this state of affairs is that the activities that have adverse impacts on the environment relate to the natural resources which women and children rely on such as water, air, land, forest etc for their livelihood and sustenance. Dixon (1998 <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/8660741/The-Effects-Of-Environmental-Degradation-On-Women-And-Childrens-Time-Allocation-Decisions-In-Malawi-Impact-On-Childrens-Welfare>) reported that women's contribution to agricultural work is highest in South Africa (47.8%) compared to any part of the world. Women are also primarily responsible for most of the rural transportation tasks such as fuel wood collection, water collection and accessing local services. The predominance of women and children in natural resources collection work implies that degradation of the environment is expected to affect them more.

Also, natural Resources Degradation is not without its attendant health implications especially on women and their children. According to Adedipe, more than 8% of Africa's population relies on fuel wood for cooking and heating (Adedipe, N.O. (1992) *"The African Environment: A Changing and Scary Scenario"*). Emission from biomass fuel is a dangerous source of air pollution in the home where women cook all year round (WHO, 1984 earthwatch.unep.ch). Wood fuels produce pollution concentration levels higher than conventional fuel under slow burning conditions; and studies have shown that cooks (mostly women) suffer from more smoke and pollutants than residents of the dirtiest urban

environments. They are affected by a higher dose than is acceptable under WHO recommended level or any national public standard (Smith et al, 1983 earthwatch.unep.ch). Other environmental effects associated with wood and other biomass burning on women and children's health is that it contributes to various respiratory and eye diseases. Moreover constant exposure often leads to bronchitis, pneumonia, and ultimately death where respiratory defence is impaired and where emissions contain high concentration of carcinogens. Cancerous diseases associated with smoke from woodfire are also common among women who have been so exposed since childhood. Rural women carry heavy loads of firewood, sometimes above 20kg allowed by ILO (ILO 1996). These heavy loads damage the spine and cause problems with child bearing.

Contaminated water causes a range of diseases which are often life threatening. Of the water-borne diseases affecting women and children, the most deadly is diarrhoeal infections. Children are the most frequent victims of diarrhoea diseases with an estimated 80 to 90 per cent of the disease caused by environmental factors (WHO, Geneva, 1997). Depending on the severity of the infection, this intestinal disease can result in anaemia, retarded growth and even death.

Although diarrhoea still accounts for 17% of childhood mortality (UNICEF, New York, 2001)



Land degradation and natural resources depletion can contribute to malnutrition. Millions of children under five years of age die each year across the globe especially in developing countries mainly from preventable diseases. Half of these deaths are either directly or indirectly attributable to malnutrition. (World Health Organization, *Childhood nutrition and progress in implementing the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes*, EB109/11, 2001.)

RECOMMENDATIONS/CONCLUSION

The antidote lies in the adoption of a policy of sustainable development. Sustainable development is defined as the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (UN 1990). To achieve sustainable development involves a judicious use of natural resources such that the carrying capacity and productive capacity are not

overexploited.

Communities and governments should alleviate the impacts of environmental degradation on women and children. An example of how this could be done is through supporting or strengthening clean water supply, agro and social forestry (such as botanical gardens and parks), household energy and alternative energy projects; and promoting the development and use of clean energy sources whenever possible.

Individuals and family units are the primary victims of adverse effects of degradation of natural resources; hence, they should see the environment and its natural constituents as the life support of man and other living things. Consequently, the campaign for conservation and management of the natural resources must go beyond lip service and become of prime concern to all. Our environment is our life.

Rotimi Michael Taiwo

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