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Anthology on Women, Health and Environment

Despite increasing interest in the issue of women's health, there is a dearth of research and training in this area. Gender-specific and gender-disaggregated data are therefore scarce. In addition, biomedical research methods and interpretations of disease and illness frequently overlook the social origins of much ill-health for women, and consequently underestimate its true dimensions.

This Anthology is part of a teaching package aimed at enhancing information in the area of women, health and environment, and encouraging teaching and research around the issues it contains. It cannot provide answers to the many difficult questions raised, although we hope that teachers, students, or other users may be inspired to undertake or promote further research on these or similar issues, thus bridging the gaps in existing knowledge in the interrelated areas of women, health and environment.

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Appendix - Authors' List

Preface

As more attention is focused on women and development issues, it has become increasingly apparent that there is a dearth of gender-specific data in the health field on which to base appropriate public health policy and decisions. Typically, health research fails to disaggregate by gender, may not take into account physical differences, or simply assumes that certain effects and outcomes will be valid for females and males alike, irrespective of biological and social differences. Research or programme activities which do focus specifically on women tend to centre around their reproductive capacities, overlooking the need for health and wellbeing during all stages of the life-cycle.

WHO is therefore encouraging activities in the sphere of women and health, with a view to filling this information gap and promoting gender-specific research aimed at producing the hard data necessary to demonstrate the poor health status of millions of women, particularly those in developing countries. These training materials on Women, Health and Environment constitute one such attempt. The package comprises three parts - an Anthology of brief examples of issues related to women, health and environment, a Teacher's Guide, and a bibliography of literature relevant to these topics. A series of case-studies and problem-based exercises evolved around key areas identified during the preparation of the Anthology is envisaged in the future. We hope that materials of this kind will be useful to teachers of environmental health, public health, family health, sociology, social medicine, medical anthropology, women's studies or development studies.

The aim of the Anthology is to bridge a number of gaps in existing concepts and understanding of the environmental factors affecting women's health, and to create clearer linkages in the area of women, health and environment, which are often still addressed as disparate issues. It appears that although there are acknowledged linkages between women and health, and more recently between women and environment, there is less understanding of how all three areas interrelate. In addition to providing information on women, health and environment, we hope that the issues raised here will stimulate further research in areas which need more attention.

The issue of women, health and environment is vast in scope, touching on a wide range of sectors and disciplines. This broad range, coupled with the dearth of health research on women noted above and the poor general understanding of the linkages, has made the location of suitable material a long and difficult task going far beyond the medical and public health fields. Topics range from the hazards of traditional rural lifestyle, mainly characterized by physical workburden, undernutrition and social constraints, to the modern industrial hazards and exposures suffered in factories, sweatshops, and other urban worksites. Both modern and traditional hazards, however, have certain common themes

which demonstrate that whatever the conditions, it is women's social status and the gender-based division of labour which largely determine the nature and amount of work they do, how much they are paid, and the kinds of health hazards to which they are exposed.

The Anthology does not follow or represent any particular theoretical approach. What the collection attempts to do is to open up a number of key topics for discussion, to give examples of how social and political constructs define many of women's activity patterns at home and at work, and how this is reflected in their health status. In this way it is possible to move beyond the medical interpretations of health and disease which frequently exclude the social origins of much ill-health in women in concentrating exclusively on the effects of external agents of disease. Topics have been selected for their ability to highlight a potential health risk to large numbers of women in deprived socioeconomic circumstances. However, given the current dearth of medical research on issues related to women's health, some of the materials used may fail to satisfy those accustomed to depending on strict epidemiological criteria.

No attempt is made to provide answers to the many questions raised by the issues cited; this would be specious given the magnitude of the problems and the necessity for solutions to be found in the local context. However, it should be noted that a number of themes arise repeatedly: women's time shortage, energy output, workburden, undernutrition, increasing responsibilities, diminishing resources, the synergistic effects on women's health of the multiple roles and responsibilities they fulfil, and the tendency for women to be channelled into particular types of employment. For this reason, examples of related problems have been taken from different countries and regions to illustrate the commonality of the issues. Neither is health always the immediate focus of a topic selected; an issue may have major health implications not addressed in health or medical literature.

We are well aware that the examples contained in this initial version are not representative of the whole range of problems related to women, health and environment. We hope in the future to issue further versions which will reflect work now being started in various countries and institutes. There are indications that a certain momentum is now building on the issue of women's health, and within a few years considerably more data may be available. We also count on users and readers to direct us to planned or ongoing work in this area.

The grouping and categorization of this broad-ranging material is open to many possibilities, according to the focus and background of the reader. That selected here is only one of these various possibilities. The examples may be reorganized into whatever order or sequence may best meet a reader's own objectives.

In all cases, the text is an abstract of the original work cited at the foot of each contribution. The introductory box which presents the issue, and the final box providing a conclusion or brief commentary, may include my own efforts to link the issues and themes or draw particular attention to important aspects. I would like to thank all authors whose

work appears in the following pages, and to apologise for any inaccuracies of interpretation which may have occurred.

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