

WOMEN'S HEALTH IN BHOPAL

The government has estimated that 250,000 were initially poisoned by the 1984 gas leak in Bhopal. Countless more have been poisoned by contamination in the years since then. Gas and contamination affected women face a variety of health problems specific to females. But health care for women and education about women's health issues is completely neglected in Bhopal. Indira Gandhi Hospital, Bhopal's only hospital dedicated to women, is appropriate only for delivering babies. There has been a total absence of research on gynecological consequences of exposure to gases and contamination, much less appropriate treatment for the women suffering from them.

The Problem

The women of Bhopal need both mainstream and alternative medical attention for problems including **menstrual irregularities, delayed menarche, early menopause, cervical cancer, and anemia**. Even basic facilities for screening, diagnosis, prevention and treatment of cervical and breast cancers are unavailable in Bhopal hospitals, even at the Indira Gandhi Hospital built especially for women.



- A February 1985 study by Medico Friends Circle (MFC) found that women who were pregnant at the time of gas exposure suffered from spontaneous abortions, still births, diminished foetal movements, and menstrual disturbances. Another study by MFC one month later uncovered large differences between more and less exposed neighborhoods in their frequencies of menstrual problems such as shortening of cycle, excess bleeding during menstruation, altered colour of blood, dysmenorrhea, and leucorrhoea.
- Hospital and clinic statistics collected in March 1985 revealed high frequency of pelvic inflammatory disease, endocervicitis, menorrhagia, and suppression of lactation.
- More than half (100 out of 198 subjects) of gas exposed women suffered from persistent gynecological problems, according to a study done by the Citizens Committee for Relief and Rehabilitation in Bhopal in 1985. They also found that of women who were pregnant at the time of gas exposure, 76% had spontaneous abortions.
- A September 1985 survey by D.R. Verma of 3,270 gas exposed families found that of the fetuses that survived the gas leak, 14.2% died within 30 days of birth.

"In Indira Gandhi Hospital, the posts of specialists in pediatric medicine, anesthetics, radiologists, and pathologists are vacant. There are seven vacant posts of medical officers and 24 vacant posts of staff nurses."

Dainik Bhaskar newspaper report on 18 Sept 2005

- The Sambhavna clinic has examined thousands of gas and contamination affected women since 1996, finding high rates of gynecological problems such as leucorrhoea (white discharge from vagina), menstrual irregularities, amenorrhoea, and sterility. Sambhavna records also indicate that in some neighborhoods near the Union Carbide factory, the average age of menarche is 13.75, more than a year later than the national average for India.

Indira Gandhi Hospital is Ineffective

The only hospital in Bhopal set up specifically for women and children is the Indira Gandhi Hospital. Though the building was constructed in June 1994, the Outpatient Ward was not opened until September 1998. The Inpatient Ward did not open until March 1999, and with only 50 beds out the originally planned 100 beds. The Supreme Court appointed a monitoring committee which found that in the Indira Gandhi Hospital "at

the time of the inspection, most of the doctors were absent until 9:15 a.m. -- only one or two doctors were present in the Outpatient Ward, the x-ray room was locked, and there was no one at the counter to take blood samples. There was a noticeable lack of cleanliness in the pathology room. One part of the lab appeared to be infested with white ants. ...The room that was shown as the emergency room did not contain anything else than a bed covered with unclean bed sheet and an oxygen cylinder, which was not in running condition." This report was sent to the Supreme Court on 31 October 2005.

What needs to be done?

It is obvious that the toxic gas released in December 1984 has had long term hormonal effects in women. Existing data must be reviewed, new research must be initiated, and health care for women restructured and made effective and available. The problems faced by gas and contamination affected women in Bhopal must be confronted not just with mainstream medicine but also alternative medical solutions. Furthermore, well funded and carefully aimed public education programmes must be designed and implemented in Bhopal's gas and contamination affected neighborhoods.

Who must do it?

The central government and its Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilizers is responsible for the medical care of of Bhopal's survivors. In 1990 when the Indian Supreme court revisited the 1989 civil settlement agreement with the Union Carbide Corporation over liabilities arising from the Bhopal gas disaster, it stated that the government would fund and manage any further medical needs arising out of the gas disaster.

WE DEMAND that the central government set up a National Commission on Bhopal with the necessary authority and funds to thoroughly research health issues specific to gas and contamination affected women, provide appropriate treatment, and provide for public education about women's health issues in Bhopal's gas and contamination affected communities. The commission must have active participation of non-government doctors, scientists, and representatives of survivor's organizations.



**This padyatra is our march for justice and dignity. We shall struggle until our last breath.
21 years is enough!**

*Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Stationery Karmachari Sangh +91 755 93031 32959 • Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Purush Sangharsh Morcha +91 755 93290 26319 • Bhopal Group for Information and Action +91 755 98261 67369
Bhopal ki Aawaaz +91 755 98261 82226 • www.bhopal.net/march*

Anemia

National percentage of women with anemia in India: **52%**

Percentage of women with anemia in Atal Ayub Nagar, a community affected by water contamination: **95%**

India data: Unicef International. Atal Ayub Nagar data: Sambhavna Trust Clinic sample of 141 women.