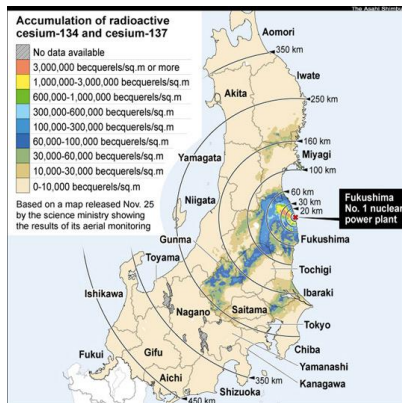


Side event on “Global Health and Environment in the Post-2015 Agenda: Lessons from the Fukushima nuclear accident” held during CSW



On 10 March, the side event “Global Health and Environment in the Post-2015 Agenda: Lessons from the Fukushima nuclear accident” was held during the Commission on the Status of Women, bringing together stakeholders to take stock of the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami in March 2011, and the continuing and multiple impacts being experienced in the region.

The event was co-hosted by [Human Rights Now](#), [Physicians for Social Responsibility](#), and [Women in Europe for a Common Future](#). It sought to explore how best to protect the environment and health of women and girls

from radiation exposure, and the importance of implementing lessons learned from TEPCO’s Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant Disaster, in a discussion on global health and environment as part of the post-2015 development agenda.

Kazuko Ito, Secretary-General of Human Rights Now, spoke of the current situation in Japan three years after the disaster, noting that a vast amount of radioactive materials were released, estimated to be over 168 times of that released by the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. This has created a serious risk to the health of the population, in particular expecting mothers, infants, children and youth. Ms. Ito noted that to date, TEPCO still does not know how to stop ongoing radioactive material leaks from the facilities. She asserted that the government’s response has been insufficient in protecting people from the negative impact on the rights to health and other economic, social and cultural rights. Policies have been formulated based on underestimates of the environmental contamination and health hazards, without effective participation by the affected communities.

Ms. Ito indicated that the Fukushima disaster has had a disproportionate impact on women and girls due to their greater vulnerability and gender inequality in affected communities. Affected women of the region are now left without viable choices, she stressed, noting that there are no effective mechanisms in place that allow women and children to participate in the decision-making process of all relevant policies, including energy policy, nuclear disaster response, health care and evacuation policy.

The Fukushima nuclear accident teaches us that nuclear energy is not sustainable, and that such a disaster violates the environment and the right to health of the most vulnerable, Ms. Ito emphasized. Similar nuclear disasters could happen again as long as we have nuclear power plants, nuclear facilities and nuclear weapons, she cautioned. The international community must take this lesson seriously and take steps towards a nuclear free world and seek alternative energy in the post-2015 discussions, she urged. “Furthermore, we have learned that contamination from a nuclear disaster can affect beyond national borders, yet we do not have an international framework on the accountability of private companies that are responsible for nuclear accidents,” she stressed, noting that the international community also needs to continue to discuss the possible long-term health risks associated with low

dose radiation exposure, and implement an effective international coordination and response system, to minimize the consequences of nuclear accidents.

Sascha Gabizon, Executive Director of Women in Europe for a Common Future (WECF) - a network of 150 women's, environmental and health organizations in 40 countries - explained that WECF works with communities to address the negative impacts of unsustainable energy. She shared evidence of health impacts from nuclear industry and uranium mining activities.

Ms. Gabizon explained that ionizing radiation is able to damage human cells, with most health effects appearing a number of years later, including not only cancer and leukemia, but also reduced immunity and fertility, and birth defects including heart defects and other mutations. She cited that the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR) estimates that between 30,000 to 207,500 children have been born with genetic mutations due to nuclear radiation from the Chernobyl disaster.

WECF recently published a [report](#) on the effect of radiation on reproductive health, which discusses that after the Chernobyl nuclear accident, a lower fertility rate was observed in affected areas, while the number of stillbirths and birth defects increased dramatically.

"Children are at higher risk from ionizing radiation, mainly because there is more cell division during childhood growth and development," Ms. Gabizon highlighted. "Dividing cells are more susceptible to mutation than resting cells." She shared that an epidemiological investigation in Germany, called the KiKK study, mandated by the Federal Office for Radiation Protection, found that children living within a five-kilometer radius of nuclear power plants had a higher leukemia risk. "It is now recognized that not only children, but also women, have a greater health risk from radioactive contamination than men," Ms. Gabizon continued. She pointed to a 2006 US National Academy of Sciences report on Biological Effects of Ionizing Radiation (BEIR VII), which found that harm to women is 50% higher than harm to men from comparable radiation doses over a lifetime. "Radiation sensitivity depends on age and gender, and is especially high for the unborn child and female organs," Ms. Gabizon explained. "The higher sensitivity of women is a result of, among others, hormones and cell growth in certain tissue, for example in breasts."

Given the risks associated with exposure to ionizing radiation, the ongoing Fukushima nuclear accident is of extreme concern, underscored Ms. Gabizon. "It is utterly irresponsible of the Japanese government to have partly re-opened the radioactively contaminated zone around Fukushima for families to return home, as people in these areas are exposed to levels of ionizing radiation 20 times higher than the legal limit, which does not take into account the increased sensitivity of children and women," she stated. "The Japanese government seems to have taken this decision mainly for financial reasons, as TEPCO is bankrupt and the state is unwilling to take on the full cost of paying for the damage and resettling the 100,000 evacuated persons."

WECF calls on governments and the UN to strengthen current regulations and institutions dealing with radiation, to take into account the greater sensitivity of women and children, and to reverse the decision that families should return to the radioactively contaminated regions around Fukushima. "Furthermore, all subsidies for nuclear energy should be immediately halted, and instead, we need the nuclear energy industry to pay into a global fund for

nuclear clean up, including paying for ending the daily pollution of the Pacific ocean from the Fukushima power plant, a renewed sarcophagus for Chernobyl, the clean up of polluted land in and around uranium mines, the safe dismantlement of nuclear power plants, and the containment of unsafely stored nuclear waste.”

Mr. Alfred Meyer, Co-Chair of the Radiation and Health Committee of the Board of Directors for Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR), delivered remarks on behalf of Dr. Andrew Kanter, Past-President of PSR. Founded in 1961, PSR is the largest physician-led organization in the United States dedicated to education about public health and environmental threats.

Mr. Meyer echoed Ms. Gabizon’s observations: “There appears to be a real lack of prevention or a public health priority in policy-making around nuclear energy, and in particular, the effect that this technology has on women, girls and children. Most of the radiation protection protocols are based on the standard 18-30 year old man and do not take into account that women are 50% more sensitive to the same dose of radiation, and young children and infants even more affected.”

Regarding the current debate in Japan on what the acceptable level of radioactive contamination must be before people can return to their homes, Mr. Meyer insisted that there is no safe level of exposure to radiation: “All radiation poses some risk, and for each 10 millisieverts (mSv) of exposure, 1 additional cancer is expected for each 1000 people exposed. When large numbers of people are exposed, it may be hard to figure out which cancers are due to the radiation, but there will be additional cancers.” He further explained that as Fukushima radiation remediation efforts were unable to sufficiently reduce exposure, the government moved to relax the legal exposure limit for the general population from 1 mSv of non-medical exposure per year to a sliding scale between 1 and 20 mSv per year. Mr. Meyer asserted that this “pragmatic” approach is not based on science, or health, but rather is a capitulation to the nuclear industry.

Mr. Meyer argued that if the post-2015 development agenda is to address the challenges of economic development, social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and good governance, then nuclear power is antithetical to the agenda on several fronts. “The nuclear industry has repeatedly demonstrated a failure to be forthcoming about the true risks and consequences of the technology,” he stressed. “We know that implications of accidents and miscalculations can extend for generations and effect human and non-human ecosystems on a massive scale. In particular, the effects of radiation on women and children demand special attention. We must protect our most vulnerable and guarantee the safety and health of our entire ecosystem.”

In closing, Mr. Meyer invoked US President John F. Kennedy’s comments upon the signing of the atmospheric nuclear test ban treaty in 1963: “The number of children and grandchildren with cancer in their bones, with leukemia in their blood, or with poison in their lungs might seem statistically small to some, in comparison with natural health hazards. But this is not a natural health hazard – and it is not a statistical issue. The loss of even one human life, or the malformation of even one baby – who may be born long after we are gone – should be of concern to us all. Our children and grandchildren are not merely statistics toward which we can be indifferent.”

Additional civil society perspectives on the role of nuclear power in the post-2015 development agenda are included in the following UN-NGLS policy briefs produced for the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals: