

SAN FRANCISCO, Apr 26, 2011 (IPS) - On this day 25 years ago, a massive explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine released clouds of radioactive particles into the atmosphere across Russia and Europe. The catastrophe had lasting effects on people's health, particularly on women and their unborn children. On this sober anniversary, we look back at Chernobyl and the lessons learned to ensure the health of Japanese women as the Fukushima disaster unfolds.

Although slow to address the crisis, the Japanese government recently raised the alert level of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plants from a 5 to a 7, the highest rating possible and on par with the only nuclear disaster of this magnitude: Chernobyl. By raising the level to 7, the government acknowledged the grave situation before Japan. What it hasn't done, however, is delineate clear protocols for how people should protect themselves against radiation, particularly the most vulnerable: pregnant women and their unborn fetuses.

Women of reproductive age are at significant risk from the effects of radiation on their bodies and reproductive systems. Studies show women's exposure to radiation may harm her future ability to bear children and can cause premature aging. The U.S. Center for Disease Control warns pregnant women that, in the event of exposure to radiation, even at low doses, the health consequences for unborn fetuses "can include stunted growth, deformities, abnormal brain function, or cancer that may develop sometime later in life."

No one understands the implications of radiation on women's health better than the Russian women who survived the Chernobyl nuclear holocaust. The amount of radiation levels released into the atmosphere was comparable to 500 atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

In the two decades after Chernobyl, approximately 200,000 people died. Women living in highly contaminated areas in Ukraine and Belarus were affected by chromosome disorders, leukaemia, psychological trauma, depression, and multiple birth defects in their children. Among women who lived in the affected area, medical studies detected high levels of thyroid and breast cancer. Unfortunately, the former Soviet Union failed to provide timely and continuous information about the effects of radiation on human health.

In light of the unique risk to women's health caused by exposure to radiation, the Japanese government and international agencies must take immediate action. Yet neither the World Health Organisation nor the International Atomic Energy Association - the two international bodies that monitor health and nuclear security respectively - have provided any information about the effect of radiation exposure to women's bodies. Even a simple google search on the impact of radiation on women does not yield much, nor are there steps that women can take to mitigate the impact on her health and her children.

Although the transition to safer energy sources is a long road, what can and must be immediately done is the proactive outreach to women. The Japanese government must address the gender-specific health risks posed by its nuclear crisis by encouraging women to have medical evaluations and providing them with available resources on the implications of nuclear

radiation on their health and strategies to reduce their exposure.

Our recommendations for women affected by the unfolding nuclear crisis are: first get a medical evaluation, and avoid foods produced locally, including lettuce, milk, berries and mushrooms. Pregnant women, specifically those in their first or second trimesters, must be especially vigilant about what they consume, as radiation passes through the umbilical cord to the unborn fetus.

Most importantly, women in Japan should reach out to the local authorities, contact their representatives, and send inquiries to the state-level medical authorities requesting informational materials about measures to protect women's health and how the Japanese government is ensuring women's health rights are protected. They should speak out if they feel misinformed, if their health concerns are dismissed (including continuous fatigue or psychological trauma), or if they are discriminated at a work place or hospital as it relates to them being affected by the nuclear crisis. The right to health and the wellbeing of future generations should be of paramount importance and vigilantly protected.

"It wouldn't have been so annoying for us to die had we known our death would help to avoid more 'fatal mistakes'," Chernobyl survivor and Ukrainian poet Lyubov Sirota wrote about the Chernobyl disaster. Unfortunately, Japan has not learned the "fatal mistakes" of Chernobyl, and the ones who will pay the heavy price are women and future generations.

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