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The Women of Chernobyl

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Many mothers say that giving birth is the most physically painful experience you will ever experience, however, they all state that it is also the most meaningful: You get over the pain when you see your baby, they say.

Women need to get over so many things: period cramps, which they must learn to cope with from a young age, regular and uncomfortable gynaecologist's visits, and then, of course, there is giving birth.

However, giving birth to a stillborn child is not something you tend to 'get over' and neither is experiencing a risky pregnancy, or having health problems as a consequence of radiation exposure.

Following the recent dramatic episodes in Japan, it is almost impossible not to think about the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and its health consequences, particularly regarding women and children.

25 years ago, one of the four reactors at the Chernobyl nuclear power station exploded. The consequences were devastating for everyone who was directly and indirectly exposed to the radiation.

Women were the first to suffer from the contamination.

Studies have shown that women who lived in contaminated villages suffered from a significantly higher rate of miscarriages, pregnancy complications, aplastic anaemia and premature deliveries than "women living in relatively clean zones," according to the Women in Europe for a Common Future network (WECF).

"Everybody knows that women are more affected by radiation, especially pregnant women. Our network focuses more on pregnant women, whose babies died after birth, and children. Women tend to be more aware of radiation as they are scared for their children," says Sabine Bock, Germany's director of WECF and Co-ordinator of Safe Energy & Climate Change, speaking exclusively to The Fresh Outlook.

Young girls (from Ukraine and Belarus), who were exposed to radiation in early childhood, have reported effects on their reproductive health. Over the course of 14 years, "the Institute of Paediatrics, Obstetrics & Gynaecology of Ukraine found that the rate of normal pregnancies among irradiated mothers was only 25.8%. Thus, nearly 75% of the patients who were exposed to radiation experienced pregnancy complications, while mothers from non-irradiated villages were 2.5 times more likely to experience problem-free pregnancies. In 33% of the irradiated cohort, women developed primary or secondary hypogalactia (reduction in the quantity of breast milk during the nursing period)," according to the WECF.

Moreover, women who had been exposed to the radiation were more prone to suffer from pathologies of bone tissue, premature loss and degeneration of teeth, among other things.

Some of these people were exposed indirectly: "Radioactive falls out from Chernobyl's clouds touched many territories, where more than three billion people live. More than 50% of these territories across

13 European countries were dangerously contaminated by radionuclides from Chernobyl (and in eight further countries- more than 30% per cent of their territories)," according to a 2006 report by Greenpeace.

Other people exposed themselves directly by working as "liquidators"(people who were in charge of removing the effects of the nuclear disaster). "Without all these people, the catastrophe could have been much worse," says Ms Bock. They contained the damage - but they damaged themselves.

According to WECF, almost one million volunteers and conscripts were sent to clean up the radioactive disaster that the explosion had left behind.

They were called liquidators; they were mainly men, but there were few women who had decided to make a contribution and help their country.

One of these women was radio biologist Natalia Manzurova.

Dr. Manzurova, who worked as a liquidator from the summer of 1987 to December 1991, has reported several health issues as a consequence of over-exposure to radiation.

Dr. Manzurova, who only speaks Russian, managed, with the help of another WECF partner, Nadezhda Kutepova, who is a human rights lawyer, to give an exclusive interview to The Fresh Outlook.

When asked about her current health condition, she says:

"My health is not good now. I was operated on (my thyroid was removed) last year, now, I have difficult consequences. My immune system is really weak, like for those with AIDS. I need lots of money for medical help, I need rehabilitation, but the State does not want to pay for it.

"When I feel good, I can work, when I am ill, I am absolutely destroyed... Now, I see it is my mission to tell people about the consequences of using nuclear energy. I hope that maybe after the incident at Fukushima (the nuclear power station in Japan), the world will stop this nuclear madness."

Talking about the Japan's disaster, she confirms that it is like a terrible deja-vu:

"I feel regret, it looks like deja vu, of course... I have thought many times before Fukushima that we did not draw the right conclusions from the Chernobyl accident. I saw bad consequences of nuclear in the world, I saw that politicians and governments do not want to think about the future of the Nuclear Power Plant (NPP), safety issues, contamination, etc. I also saw that the nuclear industry was not ready for an emergency situation.

"Also, I think that the size of the Fukushima accident will be huge, I don't think people understand it... Nuclear contamination will touch not only Japan, but many countries," she says.

Despite having to fight against the effects of radiation every day, Ms Manzurova has no regrets regarding her time spent as a liquidator:

"No, I have never regretted helping my country. It was my own choice and I am proud of it. I made the best of what I could. But I regret that my government left us, former liquidators, without help, without compensation. The law about compensation changes every year. The government cuts compensation every year, and we must prove in courts every year that we have suffered.

"The state used us and wasted us. It is wrong, it is dishonest, it is psychologically difficult to cope with," she adds.

Women are not the only victims of the Chernobyl disaster; men, and children especially, have reported terrible health problems following the nuclear disaster.

"The children are the most vulnerable because their developing bodies are keen to absorb nutrients to aid growth, so their cells unwittingly take in huge quantities of radioactive material. And since some of the Chernobyl disaster's by-products mimic essential minerals like calcium, their young bodies have absorbed the poison by default. Incidences of childhood cancer in regions affected by Chernobyl are higher than in other areas, particularly thyroid cancer," says Nige Burton, chairman of the UK charity Chernobyl Heart, speaking exclusively to The Fresh Outlook.

When asked about how many children still suffer from the affects of radiation, Mr. Burton says:

"It's difficult to say for certain how many children are still affected, as the Ukrainian government are unwilling to accept responsibility for these conditions, and withdrew any funding to help affected children after 20 years.

"It is, however, estimated that several thousand children are suffering ill health to varying degrees in

areas close to Chernobyl, but particularly in south east Belarus, where most of the initial fallout settled. These chronic conditions are thought by many independent medical organisations to be directly attributable to the Chernobyl disaster."

There are many people out there who still deny the extent of the Chernobyl disaster as it is challenging to prove that all these diseases and health problems were directly and exclusively caused by exposure to radiation. "The situation is tricky because you can see that there is an increase of diseases but you can't really prove that it is because of the nuclear disaster," says Ms Bock.

"I think these people are declining to look at reality. Still, today, it won't be possible to live closer to the nuclear power plant. These people don't realise the dimensions of the nuclear contamination. The radiation tends to slowly affect people's health. It's beyond our imagination. People need to take nuclear risks seriously.

"After Chernobyl, people had to realise that nuclear technology was too risky. Human beings believe they can deal with everything," adds Ms Bock.

Women feel they have to prove how strong they are as soon as they learn what being strong means.

But, when your health, or the health of the person you love, is not something you can 'get over', no matter how strong you are, you can't help but feel helpless.

And when other people, people who have never experienced a nuclear disaster before, lucky people, fail to recognise how damaged your life is, you feel angry. Although by that stage, it's hard to feel anything.

By Rosaria Sgueglia

[Image courtesy of Nicholas Lativy]

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