

Women's Health Exchange

A resource for education
and training

A HESPERIAN FOUNDATION PUBLICATION



Issue No. 7*, 2001

In Pakistan, women's rights and environmental health go hand in hand

Around the world, women struggle to meet basic needs for food, clean water and firewood. When the environment is damaged, this struggle is even harder. Because women experience environmental problems directly, they need to be included in solving them. When they are, the entire community benefits.

But there are many barriers that prevent women from participating in community decision-making. These barriers may include traditional beliefs about women's roles, unjust laws, poverty and lack of education.

Promoters in the Pakistani organization Shirkat Gah believe that by doing environmental health work they can address these barriers. They teach women about environmental health and work with them to make their communities safer. Activities that focus on improving environmental health can give women the opportunity to participate in their community and show their ability to resolve problems.

Like many places around the world, Pakistan has serious environmental problems. These problems affect both men and women, but women suffer in specific ways. For example:

Pesticide Poisoning. In Pakistan, women do most of the work picking cotton and planting rice. The fields are often heavily sprayed with pesticides and other harmful chemicals. Women can be exposed to pesticides in the fields as well as from contact with polluted water. When exposed to



pesticides, women can get blisters on their hands and necks, nausea, headaches, eye infections and asthma. They also face a higher risk for cancer, miscarriage and giving birth to children with health problems. But women rarely get the information, training or clothing they need for protection.

Poor Nutrition. Pakistan's farmland is used more and more to grow crops that are sold outside the country. This means people must buy vegetables and grains they once grew themselves. Poor village women cannot pay for foods they need to stay healthy and they are often the last to eat whatever food there is. Many rural Pakistani women suffer from anemia because they do not eat enough good food. When women are weak from anemia, they can experience bleeding as well as infection during childbirth.

Harder Work. Pakistani village women have always worked long days. They collect firewood and water, plant and gather food, cook family meals, maintain their homes, and care for children and animals. But their work is becoming even more difficult. When women live close to fields treated with

pesticides, the water sources they depend on can become polluted. Some women must walk more than 16 kilometers to find clean drinking water. Many women also spend half their day searching for firewood, because wood is so scarce. With so much work, women have little time for themselves or to participate in community meetings and other activities.

Shirkat Gah brings women together to talk about health problems and the environment. They use activities that help women share their knowledge about their communities, identify problems and find solutions as a group. For example, a group of women in the rural region of Punjab came together to discuss why their children were getting so many infections. They realized that the cause was trash piling up in the streets of their village. The women decided they would collect the trash and burn it. Later at an environmental workshop organized by Shirkat Gah, they realized that smoke from the fires was hurting their eyes and lungs. The women decided that a safer way to get rid of the trash would

please turn to page 2

Inside

Profits and the environment ..	page 2
Training guide	
How to do a health walk	page 3
A healthier cooking stove	page 9
From the schools to the community.....	page 11
Keeping neighborhoods safe from toxics	page 12

A healthier environment and more equality for women

continued from page 1

be to bury it. This was a benefit to everyone in the community.

One way Shirkat Gah helps women understand environmental issues is to teach groups how to make maps of their communities. Maps can be used as a tool to help women discover and analyze problems in their communities. They use the maps to record the way their land and resources have changed over the years and to mark unsafe or hazardous areas in the community.

Despite a lack of education and resources, rural Pakistani

women have shown they are willing and capable to find solutions to environmental problems. With each step they take, they have realized the power they have as a group. Now everyone can see that women can work together to change the conditions that affect their health and the health of their communities.

Written with information and help from Khawar Mumtaz of Shirkat Gah, and Maya Shaw.

Shirkat Gah can be reached at:
3 Tipu Block
New Garden Town
Lahore, Pakistan
e-mail: sgah@sgah.brain.com.pk

Pollution and poverty are hidden costs of the profit system

The cost of caring for a family and maintaining a household is often invisible or hidden. This is because caring for a family or husband is taken for granted as "women's work." And because women's work is not paid for, it is not seen as a cost. Environmental damage is another hidden cost in our communities. Both of these kinds of hidden costs can have harmful results on our health — as women know.

When a corporation makes a product, it has to pay certain costs: the parts needed to make the product, the wages of the workers, the packaging and transportation of the finished product, and the advertising (so people will want to buy the product).

But there are other costs in making a product that the company does not pay. In the process of making their product, they might also pollute the water, contaminate the air, destroy land, forests and other resources that people depend on, or cause their workers to get sick. Unless they are forced to, the company does not pay for the cost of this destruction or for preventing it. While the damage may be easy to see, the costs are hidden. They are hidden because we pay in other ways, when people must cope with ill health and living conditions that are getting worse.

The world economy is now organized to work in favor of the rich countries and the transnational corporations. The poor countries of the South reap small benefits from the wealth these corporations make, and they end up paying many hidden costs. This economic "development" has many names: modernization, globalization, free trade. Whatever you call it, it is poisoning our rivers, our farmlands and our air, and making life harder for everyone, especially for women.

Poor countries are pressured to pay hidden costs by accepting environmental damage as part of development. Many activities that bring income — mining, logging, cash-crop farming, factory work — damage the natural environment and lead to crowded living conditions, poor sanitation, a larger gap between rich and poor; and

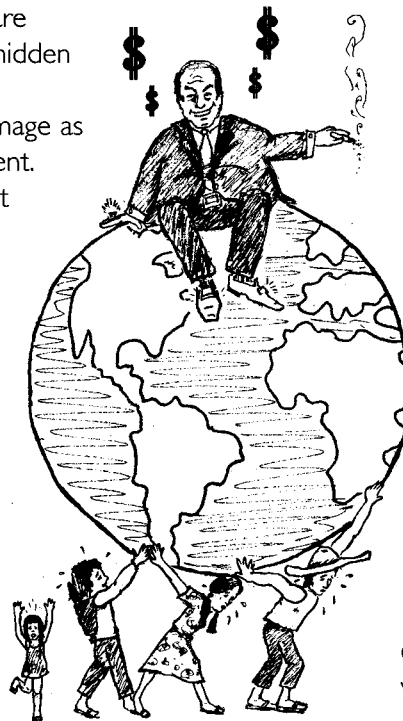
increases in diseases like cancer, asthma and others. In the end, we pay more for the problems these activities cause than we gain.

When people desperately need income, they have to make hard choices. These choices would be hard enough if people were in charge of their own development. But as it is, people often feel they have no choice but to surrender their own health to the demands of the profit system in the hope they will be rewarded later on. But usually the reward never comes.

What comes instead is more environmental destruction, more sickness and more poverty.

This newsletter talks about women's groups who are struggling to improve their communities' health through environmental action. These are not issues that can be handled alone — it takes a whole community.

The following pages provide some activities that can help to make environmental problems visible to your community.



Training guide

Why organize a health walk in your community

We depend upon the land we live and work on, the air we breathe and the water we drink. Yet we often do not think about how we are using these resources. During a health walk, people take a closer look at their community. They try to find things that may be causing health problems, like a contaminated water source, uncovered latrines or scarce firewood.

The activities described in "How to do a health walk" can be used in many different ways. The general goal is for everyone to better understand the connection between our surroundings and our health. When a health walk is done as a group, people share with each other what they know about problems. Then they can work together on possible solutions. The more people involved, the better.

The next pages are a sample plan for how to do a health walk. You will need to adapt it to your own community. You may also find useful ideas in the "Ways to Focus on the Environment" starting on page 6.



We asked the health workers and agricultural extension agents to lead a health walk on pesticides and other farm chemicals.

We learned about the dangers of breathing in or touching pesticides, and how they contaminate our water and soil. We also learned that there are ways to keep both crops and people healthy by using pesticides carefully, and as little as possible.

► To learn more about a particular problem

Usually, a health walk is organized after people have already identified a particular problem. It may be an environmental problem, such as unsafe drinking water or air pollution. A health walk can help people understand how this problem affects their health. Or a health walk can focus on a health concern such as children sick with asthma or diarrhea, possibly caused by the air or water in the community. Focusing on people's concerns during a health walk can motivate them to become active.

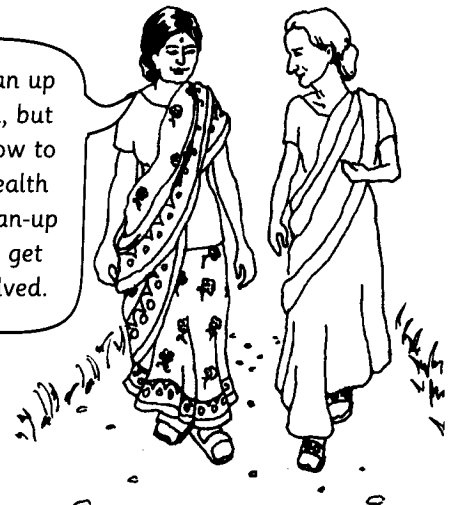


In our community, more and more children have asthma. We did a health walk to look at air quality, and noticed there were a lot of idling buses near our homes giving off smelly fumes.

► To identify problems in your community

Sometimes health walks can be used as a way to identify problems that people may not have noticed before. By looking carefully at the whole community, a health walk can be an opportunity for people to voice many concerns and wishes. Together, the group can agree about what problems to focus on and then consider what actions to take.

We wanted to clean up our neighborhood, but we didn't know how to start. We did a health walk to plan a clean-up campaign and to get more people involved.



Training guide

How to do a health walk

1. Look at changes over time.

Thinking about how things have changed over the years is often a useful way to start. People can think of the ways in which the water, air and land may have become less healthy for everyone. For example, before beginning a health walk you can ask the older members in the community to describe how things were 20 or 30 years ago: *Were there more trees, more water? Was the air clearer? Was the water cleaner? What else has changed? Where were the houses then, where are they now? Are there more houses? More traffic? More roads? Are people growing different crops or growing them in a different way?*

Then ask people to think about whether these changes in their surroundings might be affecting the health of the community. Based on this discussion, the group can identify some issues they want to look more closely at as they do a health walk.

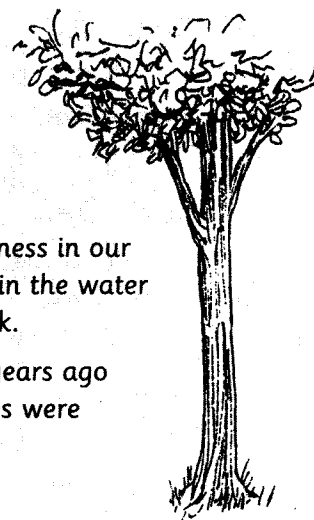
Here is a story from a group in Honduras:



30 years ago the hills above our village were forested and beautiful. But we started cutting down trees to use the land for cattle grazing, and more families started moving into the hills because there was nowhere else for them to go. Now most of the trees have been cut down and there are many more people living on the hillsides than before. There is less water in the stream and it is much dirtier.

Even though we knew that these things had changed, we never gave it much thought. It wasn't until we talked about it as a group that we realized that the loss of trees on the hillside was one of the reasons our water is now scarce and contaminated. We realized that the dirty drinking water was causing more diarrhea and illness in our children. The health worker explained that this was caused by bacteria in the water from human waste and from the cattle that were grazing above the creek.

Someone else reminded us about the mudslide that happened a few years ago during a very heavy rain. Fortunately no one was hurt, but many homes were washed away. We decided that this was a health problem too.



2. Learn more about a particular problem.

Sometimes it helps to learn about a particular environmental health problem before you start a health walk. You might find radio programs, books, brochures or newspaper articles helpful in gathering more information to present to others in your community. It may help to present this information in creative ways by using songs, games, puzzles or plays. You can find examples of these activities in *Helping Health Workers Learn*, chapters 1, 4, 11, 12, and 13. Another way to learn more is to have people from outside the community present information or join the health walk. They can share their knowledge and point out problems that local people may not notice.

Training guide



3. Plan your walk.

It helps to make a list of things to look for during the health walk that are related to a particular health concern, or you can list more general things to observe. Read "Ways to focus on the environment" on the next few pages for ideas.

The group should decide together on what areas to walk through and what places to visit.

Your group may prefer to form teams to walk through different parts of the community. Creating mixed teams of men and women, or of younger people and older people, can be useful because everyone in the group will notice different kinds of problems. Or you may decide to make one team only men and one only women. Teams grouped this way may notice particular kinds of problems and feel more free to discuss them. It can also be interesting to talk about why the teams see different or similar problems.

4. Walk!

Agree on what time the group should gather again to discuss what everyone has found. Ask someone in each team to remember or write down the problems that the team finds during the walk.

5. Discuss the causes and effects of the problems.

The most important part of the health walk is to talk about it afterwards! This helps the group create a shared understanding of the problems by exploring what the causes and health effects are.

Ask everyone to share with the group what they saw during the walk and to list the problems they saw. The facilitator can write this list of "problems" on a chalkboard or on large sheets of paper. You can also draw pictures to represent the problems that the group found — especially if not everyone in the group is comfortable reading.

Then ask everyone to think about the "causes" of each of these problems. Write or draw these ideas in a column next to the problem list. Then ask the group how each problem affects the health of people in the community. Write or draw the different "health effects" related to each problem in a column next to the problem.

Air quality around our homes

Causes	Problems	Health Effects
• cooking with green wood – not enough dry wood • cigarette smoke • buses	• smoky air inside and near houses	• lung infection • coughing • children sicker with asthma

When they burn garbage outside my house a lot of smoke comes inside. I've noticed that my children cough more. This should also go under the causes list.

6. Take action.

Actions can either try to get rid of a problem or reduce the harmful effects of a problem. To think about possible actions, ask the group to look over the list they have made of problems, causes and health effects.

Try to solve the problem

Looking at the list of causes, the group can think of possible solutions to address the problems. For example, since cooking with green wood causes smoky air in houses, some

communities have built stoves that use gas or electricity instead of wood. Others have looked at why there is only green wood left in their forests and have started a tree planting program.

We know people are getting sick from using too much pesticides and they are expensive. But we use pesticides on our bean crops because we're afraid that otherwise we'll lose crops to insects. People have also said they are afraid of plant diseases leaving scars on the beans. No one will buy them for a good price when they don't look perfect. Can we think of ways to solve these problems?

I've seen other villages rotate their crops more often. This might help to keep pests and diseases away. We could try this first with a small plot.

There might be ways to use less pesticides. I've heard that if you plant your crops earlier there are less insects and diseases.



Ways to focus on the environment

Garbage

Garbage can be harmful if it is not handled in a safe way. Garbage feeds rats and flies, which can spread germs that make people sick. When people burn garbage, it fills the air with unhealthy smoke. This can cause lung infections and make asthma much worse. Burning plastic and batteries is especially dangerous.

It can be safe to burn garbage, but it should be done away from where people live and work. Garbage can also be buried, but only away from sources of water or where food is grown.

Garbage is a big problem but it is easy to fix, especially if we begin at home. You can use "the three R's":

- Reduce:** Try not to use products that have a lot of packaging, like junk food.
- Reuse:** Reuse jars, cans and bags instead of throwing them away after one use.
- Recycle:** To recycle is to break down garbage and make it

into new products. In some places, glass, paper, cardboard, aluminum and plastic can be recycled. Another way to recycle is to make compost — to turn organic garbage like food scraps into fertilizer for gardens and fields.

To recycle effectively you must separate plastic, glass, paper and metal from food scraps. Even if your community has no way to recycle, by separating the garbage into what can be burned, buried or composted, you will reduce the amount of litter and prevent many health problems.

Ask yourself:

Where does our garbage go?

Is there a safer way to get rid of it?

Are there ways to make less garbage?

A health walk can bring attention to the piles of garbage people are used to seeing every day. You can talk about why garbage collects where it does, and look for better places to put it. You can also make your health walk a clean-up walk where people pick up trash along the way.

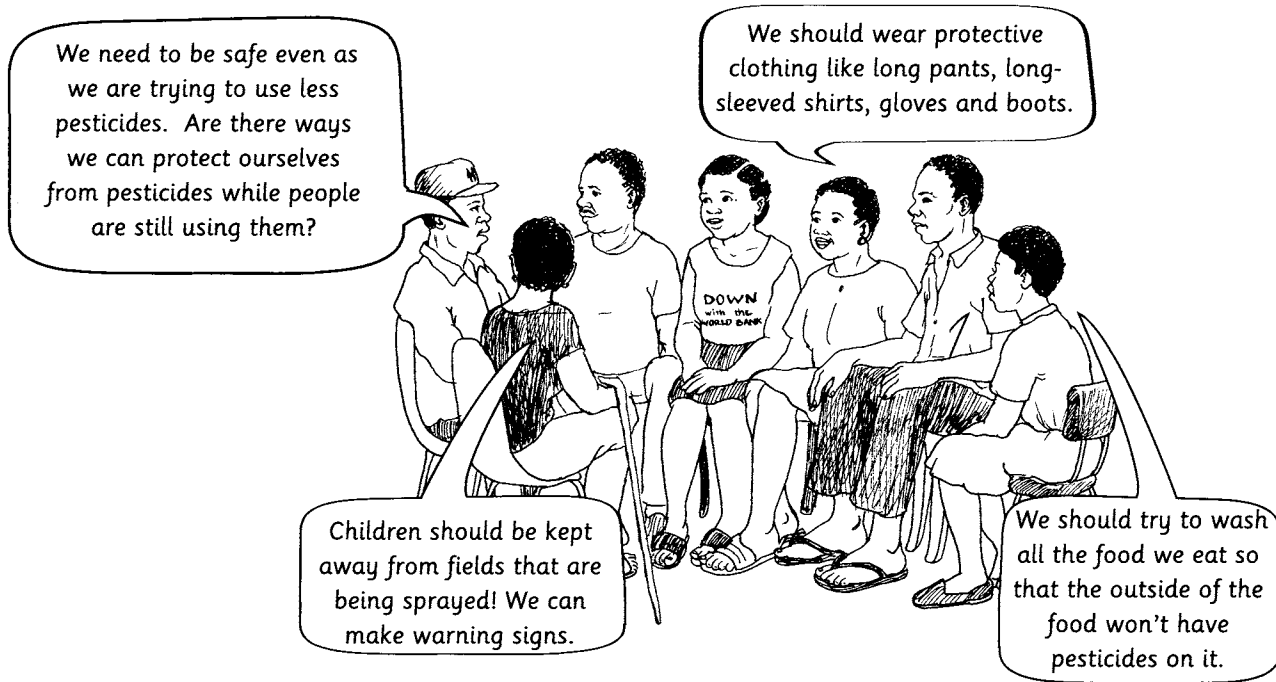
guide

Reduce the effects of the problem

Completely solving the problem often takes a lot of time, so it is also important to look at ways to reduce some of the harmful effects in the meantime. Ask the group to look over the list of health effects and to find ways to reduce the harm. For example, better ventilation with doors and windows can reduce the smoke in a house. Sometimes a few changes to a

stove can be made so that it makes less smoke. (For information on how to make a safer stove, see page 9.)

Once the group has decided on possible actions, they can begin to work on a plan and take the first steps toward reaching their goal.



Toxic waste

Factories, power plants and other industries often create toxic waste. Toxics are poisons that harm people's health. Some toxics cause harm immediately. Others cause harm that you can only see after a long time. Toxic waste can spread far from where it starts. For example, toxic smoke from factories can drift to nearby neighborhoods. Toxic waste dumped in rivers and streams or buried in landfills contaminates our water and soil.

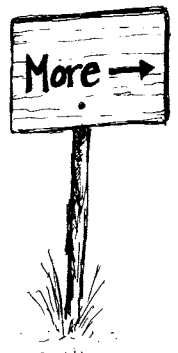
Toxic waste can cause all kinds of health problems. It can increase people's chances of getting cancer. It can make it harder for women to get pregnant. It can cause terrible birth defects. It can even slow children's learning ability. Different kinds of toxic waste can cause different health problems.

Ask yourself:

Is toxic waste being dumped, burned or buried near where we live?

Are toxic materials used or produced where we work?

Toxic waste is expensive to handle properly. And because it is often caused by factories owned by big corporations, it usually takes long-term social action to force these companies to control it.



Keeping neighborhoods safe from toxics

by **Diana Reiss-Koncar**

In San Diego, along with other cities in the United States, many people in poor communities are exposed to dangerous amounts of pollution from industries. Twenty years ago, a group of friends from several of San Diego's poor, mainly Latino neighborhoods came together to put a stop to the air pollution and toxic (poisonous) waste. They formed the Environmental Health Coalition (EHC).

In 1995, EHC trained a group of respected women from the community to become neighborhood *promotoras* (activists). They called themselves SALTA (in English, this means Latinas Taking Action for Environmental Health). In 1997, EHC hired 5 of the *promotoras* to work as community organizers. Hiring women from the neighborhoods to be organizers has helped communities stay informed about environmental health problems and protect their health. Each organizer works with 50 families in her neighborhood to give them news and mobilize them for community meetings on health issues. As a result, EHC has almost 1,000 people who participate in community actions to protect their health.

The organizers also did a health survey and found that many people in their communities had problems breathing. Methyl bromide (a toxic chemical which causes birth defects) was being sprayed to kill insects in a nearby warehouse, and was causing many of these breathing problems. The organizers successfully helped stop the spraying.

SALTA also uses the network to help people work together on other problems. For example, the community has been able to stop the building of a boxing arena and night club near their homes. As one woman explains: "It took us 20 years to clean

the neighborhood up in every sense of the word — from drugs to toxics."

Another threat to the community's health started when San Diego's baseball team, the Padres, wanted to build a stadium near Barrio Logan, a SALTA community. Part of the land



SALTA and community members protested burning toxic waste in their neighborhood

they were going to build on had been used by the local power plant to dump toxic chemicals. Before the Padres could build the stadium, the power plant had to burn the soil and had permission to burn it where it was. But SALTA quickly realized the danger of burning the waste right in the neighborhood. Sixty community members participated in a demonstration against the burning, and TV and newspaper reporters came to cover the event.

The Padres worried that if the protests continued, people would think they were only concerned about business and not the community. The Padres and the power plant called SALTA the next day to ask them to negotiate. After 3 weeks of talks with SALTA, the Padres agreed to take the toxic waste away and burn it far from any community. And they also promised not to use dangerous chemicals to kill rats and insects in the new stadium.

It could have been very difficult to

organize people in the community to protest against such a popular baseball team as the Padres. "Many of us are baseball fans, especially the men," says one SALTA activist. "But the health of our community comes first. We did what we had to do. And everyone is satisfied."

SALTA is now training 4 new groups to learn about health problems caused by toxics in the air so they can work to protect their community's health. Their success is a great example of the good things that can come from community organizing.

Contact information:
Environmental Health Coalition
1717 Kettner Blvd., Suite 100
San Diego, CA 92101 USA
phone: 01-619-235-0281
e-mail: ehc@environmentalhealth.org

The **Women's Health Exchange** is a publication of the Hesperian Foundation.

The Hesperian Foundation is a non-profit organization committed to helping people in poor communities throughout the world care for their health by providing tools and resources for informed self-care. We believe that people can and should take the lead in their own health care.

Coordinating editors: Julie Gerk and Susan McCallister

Writing and Editing: Andrew Bartlett, Jeff Conant, Aryn Faur, Julie Gerk, Deborah Greenstein, Todd Jailer, Elaine Knobbs, Jane Maxwell, Susan McCallister, Elena Metcalf, Diana Reiss-Koncar, Gregory Rowe, Sarah Shannon, and Maya Shaw

Design and Layout: Christine Sienkiewicz

This issue of the *Women's Health Exchange* was produced with the help of the following people: René Córdova of Red Fronteriza de Salud y Ambiente, A.C., Noemi Danao, David de Leeuw, John McCracken, Khawar Mumtaz of Shirkat Gah, Diane Takvorian and Maria Moya from the Environmental Health Coalition (EHC).

Logo: Sara Boore

Artists: Heidi Broner, Regina Faul-Doyle, Joyce Knezevich, Petra Röhr-Rouendaal, Lucy Sargeant, Christine Sienkiewicz, and David Werner

We would like to hear from people who have used this newsletter in their community. Write to us about your experience! Contact:

The Hesperian Foundation
1919 Addison Street, Suite 304
Berkeley, California 94704 USA
tel: 1-510-845-1447, fax: 1-510-845-9141
e-mail: whx@hesperian.org

