

Shadow report to the 86th Session of the CEDAW

**THE CONSEQUENCES OF NUCLEAR
TESTING ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN
FRENCH POLYNESIA – MĀ'OHI NUI**



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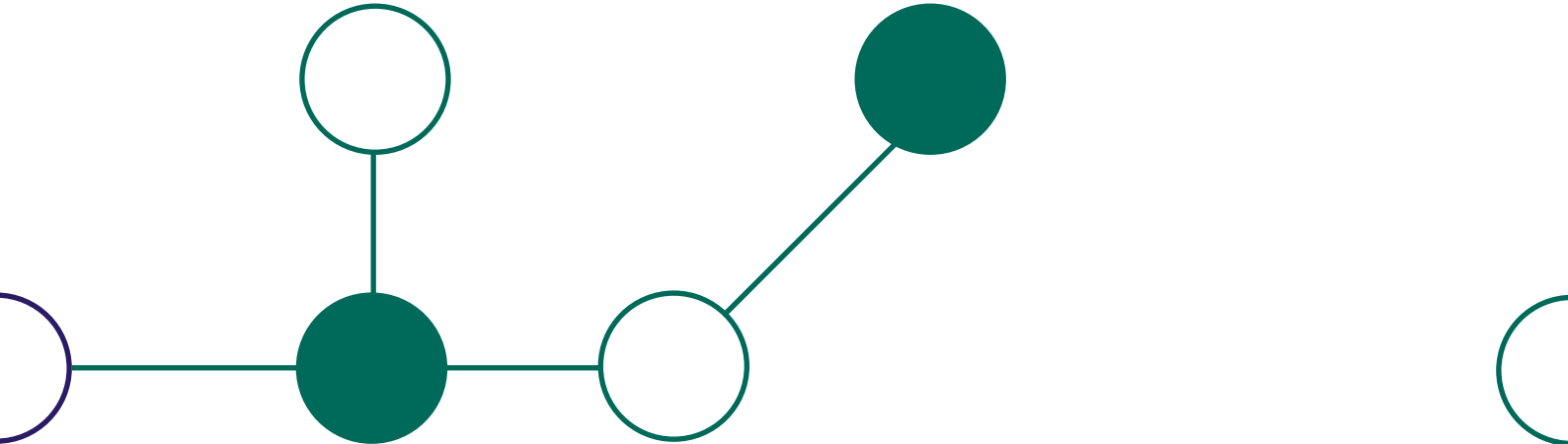
THE CONSEQUENCES OF NUCLEAR TESTING ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN FRENCH POLYNESIA – MĀ'OHĪ NUI

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I. Introduction

Last March, the Tahitian anti-nuclear activist Hinamoeura Cross gave birth to her second child, putting an end to a two-year struggle with her oncologist who finally gave Hinamoeura medical consent so she could become pregnant again. Her baby is a healthy boy of 6 months now. Although her joy of bringing this baby into the world is immense, so was the fear of losing her child during a pregnancy interspersed by medical check-ups. Far from being an isolated case, it is perhaps the first time we hear such a story, made possible by the refusal to “stay silent.” Her outspokenness about her own struggles of speaking up about the shame she feels of being sick, and her long-time reluctance to speak about all the associated psychological trauma (including of calling herself a victim of nuclear tests) testifies to the vast array of specific diseases and consequences that have impacted women in French-occupied Polynesia, most of them still ashamed to speak about their struggles resulting from the impact of French nuclear testing on their bodies and their lives.

Born to a family of activists, Hinamoeura’s struggle echoes the struggles of other women who have been resiliently silent about the issue, overwhelmed by a feeling of guilt that traps them into a muteness that is hard to shatter and, for many, hard to understand. This is the case for Tina, a 57-year-old woman who lives in Fa’a’a, one of the most populated towns of Tahiti. Her husband worked on the atoll of Moruroa, one of the two testing sites where France decided to conduct its nuclear tests from 1966 to 1996. Tina lost five children, all of them newborn babies who suffered from multiple skin issues after their birth.

These life stories go unnoticed and yet have much to reveal on France’s ongoing refusal to accept responsibility for the intergenerational health effects and associated social and psychological impacts of its nuclear weapons testing program on women in French Polynesia. In 2016, the CEDAW Committee expressed concerns about the lack of measures taken by France to “address the impact of the 30 years of French nuclear testing on the health of

women and girls in French Polynesia”² and made recommendations relating to nuclear testing and compensation.

Among other explicit recommendations it made, the CEDAW Committee called on the State party, France, to “Conduct a rigorous, transparent and gender-sensitive impact assessment of nuclear testing on women’s health in French Polynesia and accelerate the processing of claims for the compensation of victims.”³ **To this day, no such assessment has ever been made, nor have any commitments been made on behalf of the French State to do one.**

Despite France’s explanations in its ninth periodic report to the CEDAW Committee regarding the processing of compensation claims by victims of nuclear testing, serious concerns remain. In particular, we highlight the impacts of France’s nuclear testing in French Polynesia on women’s rights and outline the lack of transparency on the unacknowledged gendered impacts of France’s nuclear testing program.

II. Background Context

Between 1966 and 1996, France conducted 193 nuclear weapons tests in French Polynesia, of which 46 were atmospheric tests carried out between 1966 and 1974 followed by 147 underground tests conducted between 1975 and 1996.

In the immediate aftermath of the nuclear testing period in 1996, the dominant paradigm that framed legal concerns relating to impacts of the tests consisted of documenting the health consequences for the workers on Moruroa. Because of their immediate exposure at the testing sites, and the range of health issues they faced, the workers became the target population for sociological studies and human-rights violation cases. This was based, on the assumption that data on the evolution of their health conditions and levels of exposure had been scrupulously recorded but withheld in top-secret medical files, rendered inaccessible to those being studied, and deposited in French military archives.

The years that followed consisted of unveiling the risks they were exposed to; listing the diseases they contracted because of their exposure to radioactivity; and establishing a legal process through which the first and immediate victims could get compensation. In the aftermath of the sociological study conducted in 1997 by Peter De Vries and Hans Seur, the workers created an organization, *Moruroa e Tātou* (Moruroa and Us), to advocate for more transparency and to seek reparations from the French state after their exposure to ionizing radiation and the diseases that ensued. This first study enabled the workers to open-up about their work on the testing sites with one another and encouraged them to coordinate their actions to ask for their medical files and organize with other workers in France, who took part in the French nuclear tests in Algeria from 1960 to 1966.

In 2006, a committee was created by the legislative assembly of French Polynesia and tasked to investigate the consequences of the 30 years of French nuclear testing. After 6 months of field work, interviews and research, a robust 334-page report was produced. It made a significant contribution in outlining the visible and invisible impacts of the 30-year testing period.

Among the most notable findings were: the need for continuing health monitoring, especially for the part of the population located closer to the testing sites, such as the workers on Moruroa. Ongoing legal battles led to the adoption of the Morin law in 2010, seen as the first victory, as it was official recognition by the French state of the exposure of workers to radiation. In the last decade, 1,747 claims have been registered, but no more than 500 people have received financial compensation. If we strictly rely on the Compensation Committee for Nuclear Test Victims (CIVEN) report of 2019, only 64 of these were compensated, 63 in Polynesia and 1 in Algeria.⁴

Despite the Morin law adopted in 2010 that compensates victims of immediate exposure to radiation during the nuclear weapons tests, France continued to deny and minimize the environmental and health consequences of nuclear testing on the population of French Polynesia present during the time of testing. The release of the book *Toxique - Enquête sur les essais nucléaires français en Polynésie*, in March 2021, contributed to changing peoples' understanding of issues. The book shared the results of 2 years of investigations and scientific calculations by a team of international researchers, and revealed that France had concealed the geographic extent of contamination and the number of people exposed to radioactive fallout from the atmospheric tests conducted from 1966 to 1974. Contrary to what had been previously claimed, more than 110,000 people were shown to have been exposed to radiation by a single test (code-named Centaur) carried out in July, 1974; in other words, the great majority of the population of French Polynesia at the time were exposed.⁵ Yet, to this day, the people of French Polynesia do not have access to full information about the consequences of nuclear testing, despite repeated legal attempts to compel the French state to provide full disclosure.

III. Gender Impacts of Nuclear Testing – Violations of Articles 3, 12 and General Recommendations 24, 19 and 35

The dominant legal paradigm of assessing the level of exposure of the population as a whole during the testing period has precluded looking specifically at the consequences of 30 years of nuclear testing on women. And yet, it becomes more and more urgent to investigate this. Today, 30 years after the last French nuclear bomb test, many of the workers who were the first generation of people exposed have passed away. It is now their children and wives who bear the marks of the consequences of nuclear testing in their bodies and on their lives, and carry the burden of the continuing struggle for compensation.

This is the visible and most obvious legal consequence thrust upon women. But there exist other unseen consequences that must be investigated, such as the effects of nuclear testing on the reproductive rights of women, and gender-specific health diseases such as breast and uterine cancers that are fast growing but harder to track.

The 2006 committee highlighted a well-known and yet underestimated phenomenon that has cast a long shadow on the issue of nuclear testing as a whole, what the CESCEN⁶ report referred to as “the disease of secrecy.”⁷ The disease of secrecy infected not only personnel in the apparatus of the Pacific testing center, but the population as a whole, and it infected every aspect of life.

This partly explains the difficulties in bringing to light the full specter of the socio-environmental consequences of 30 years of nuclear testing, and the consequences on and for women in particular. Given that women were positioned as secondary to the workers who were the first exposed, they hardly found the courage to speak about their issues, particularly the severe health effects that they have been suffering. In addition to that, the scarcity of data made available makes it harder to trace health issues and diseases as they pertain to women.

Women’s health is more vulnerable to the effects of radioactive fallout from nuclear testing for a number of reasons, their reproductive function being a key factor. Studies have shown that exposure to radiation can harm women’s ability to conceive, carry pregnancies to term and bear healthy children. The testimonies at the beginning of this report bear witness to this being so in French Polynesia. As did research in the aftermath of Chernobyl, where the birth rate decreased parallel to the number of stillbirths that dramatically increased.⁸ This coincides with the experiences of women in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In January 2021, the *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)* came into effect and was the first that specifically referenced the disproportionate impact on women. Identified as a clear manifestation of violence against women, it has been noted that women are excluded from any deliberations regarding the technology of nuclear weapons, their testing and their aftermath, all of which are inherently violent against women.⁹

There is evidence to indicate that the impact of nuclear weapons is definitely not gender-neutral. The impact of nuclear radiation on women has been underreported since data collection on radiation injury has only recently become sex-disaggregated. Standards for evaluating exposure to radiation were established on males because they predominated in the nuclear industry during the development of nuclear technology in the 20th century.

In addition, women are more likely to experience discrimination from their communities and to be labeled as “contaminated” after being exposed to nuclear radiation. Due to rigid gender

norms around marriage and reproduction, women exposed to radiation or the impact of radiation following nuclear testing suffer stigma and prejudice more than males because they are often perceived as not suited for motherhood and by extension marriage.¹⁰ As noted above, this perception has led to women living with trauma and self-blame which also negates her full enjoyment of the rights and entitlements envisaged by CEDAW.

These findings, in our opinion, show a violation of General Recommendations 24, 19 and 35 and Articles 3 and 12 of the CEDAW Convention. Women's right to health is violated by nuclear testing, by lack of protection from radiation and continues to be violated by the refusal to acknowledge the harms caused particularly to women and by the continued lack of compensation.

IV. Suggested Questions

In light of the concerns brought to you, we urgently and respectfully encourage the CEDAW Committee to ask the following questions of France:

- How does the French government plan to remedy its failure to meet compensation claims by women and men who have been living with the inter-generational effects of radiation exposure from France's 193 nuclear tests in French Polynesia?
- What is France doing to assess the gendered impacts of its nuclear tests on women in French Polynesia?
- When will France make public the data it has gathered on women and birth defects in French Polynesia?
- What measures will France take to fully disclose information and data on the health impacts of its nuclear testing program on the indigenous people of French Polynesia?
- Will France mandate a body of experts to investigate the genetic consequences of its 193 nuclear tests on women's reproductive health and rights in French Polynesia?
- Will France cooperate with local authorities in French Polynesia to improve and extend victim assistance and environmental remediation measures, in light of such obligations in the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of nuclear weapons?

V. Recommendations

Following the questions raised above and the issues raised by local organizations in French Polynesia, we would make the following recommendations:

- That the French government disclose all medical data and reports of birth defects in French Polynesia registered between 1966 to 1996.
- That the French government disclose the full list of radiation illnesses specific to women on which data was collected following the atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons in French Polynesia.
- That the French government conduct a sociological study on the consequences of its 30 years of nuclear testing on women's psychological distress.
- That the French government provide access to medical treatments for women who are known to have suffered from the trauma of experiencing multiple deaths of their newborns as a result of birth defects.
- That the French government investigate the socio-environmental impacts of its testing program on the livelihoods of women, especially those who lived near the testing sites of Moruroa, such as Tureia in the Tuamotu islands.
- That the French government be required to commission a mandatory independent genetic study to shed light on the intergenerational impacts of nuclear testing on the population of French Polynesia.

Endnotes

- 1- *This report was prepared by Mililani Ganivet on behalf of Moruroa e Tātou and Societe 193 in French Polynesia with support from DAWN.*
- 2- *Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women ‘Concluding observations on the combined seventh and eighth periodic reports of France’ (25 July 2016).*
- 3- *Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women ‘Concluding observations on the combined seventh and eighth periodic reports of France’ (25 July 2016).*
- 4- *Jean-Marie Collin and Patrice Bouveret, Radioactivity Under the Sand: The Waste from French Nuclear Tests in Algeria (Heinrich Böll Foundation, July 2020;13).*
- 5- *Philippe Sébastien, Staius Thomas, Toxique : Enquête sur les essais nucléaires français (Presses Universitaires de France, 2021). The book presents the findings of a two-year collaborative research study by a nuclear expert at Princeton University’s Science and Global Security program, an investigative journalist at Disclose, and a researcher of environmental crimes at INTERPRT. The study correlated evidence from declassified official files on the nuclear testing program with historical meteorological records and used a computer software program to model the dispersion of radioactive clouds across the group of islands. See Moruroa Files, accessible at [Moruroa Files](#).*
- 6- *Commission d’enquête sur les conséquences des essais nucléaires [Commission of Inquiry into the Consequences of Nuclear Tests].*
- 7- *The people of French Polynesia and nuclear testing, a report drafted by the Committee of investigation of the consequences of French nuclear testing in French Polynesia.*
- 8- *Gender Equality, Women’s Rights and Women’s Priorities: Recommendations for the proposed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Post-2015 Development Agenda.*
- 9- <https://www.youngfeminist.eu/2021/12/why-nuclear-weapons-are-violent-against-women/#:~:text=Nuclear%20weapons%20are%20a%20feminist%20concern&text=Data%20from%20Nuclear%20Information%20and,received%20the%20same%20radiation%20dose>.
- 10- *Ibid.*



