Women showed breasts and pregnant bellies outside the House of Commons on Tuesday 15/1/02 in a silent protest to highlight the harm environmental pollution is doing to human health and reproduction. Forty years of cumulative evidence points to links between the widespread use of pesticides and synthetic chemicals and rising levels of birth defects, reproductive disorders and breast cancer. The demo preceded a presentation to the All Party Parliamentary Group on breast cancer by the Ban Lindane Group, calling for precautionary action to reduce these risks.

The pesticide lindane is linked with breast cancer and may also disrupt the hormone system. Although a European ban on agricultural use comes into force this year, it is still used on crops in other parts of the world.

Lindane is typical of the thousands of synthetic chemicals in day to day use which are or may be linked to serious human health problems. Breast cancer is symbolic of the many illnesses that are thought to be linked to the same environmental factors.

The Ban Lindane delegation asked MPs to back their calls for:

- greater priority to be given in Government policy to 'primary prevention' to reduce the incidence, not just the effects, of breast cancer.
- a separate infrastructure to be created, with a multi-disciplinary approach involving all stakeholders, to begin work on a national strategy for primary prevention of breast cancer.
- a new independent working group to push this agenda forward.

WEN believes that action to reduce breast cancer cases will have knock on benefits for other health problems and the environment as a whole.

For further information please contact: Liz Sutton, Press Officer 020 7481 9004, Fax: 020 7481 9144 or email: info@wen.org.uk www.wen.org.uk

Notes to editors:
1. Breast Cancer is now the most common form of cancer in the UK. An estimated 39,500 cases are diagnosed each year, compared to 38,900 new cases of lung cancer. (Source: Imperial Cancer Research Fund (ICRF) and Cancer Research Campaign (CRC) figures published 5/11/01)

2. The chances of a woman in the UK contracting breast cancer during her lifetime have risen from 1:12 in 1995 to 1:9 in 2001. Improvements in cancer care have not reversed the rising incidence rate.

3. Only 8-10% of cases are known to be due to genetic disposition ('Putting Breast Cancer on the Map' report, WEN, 1999); Lifestyle accounts for only about 30% of all known cases; therefore between 50-70% of cases have no known cause.

4. Oestrogen-mimicking chemicals are increasingly present in the
environment through synthetic chemicals in pesticides, plastics, environmental pollution, household products and cosmetics. Breast cancer is linked to lifetime exposure to oestrogen; the more oestrogen we are exposed to in our lifetime, the greater our risk of developing breast cancer. (Putting Breast Cancer on the Map)

5. Many of the 30,000 synthetic chemicals in regular commercial use (Source: Commission of the European Communities - White Paper - Strategy for a future Chemicals Policy Feb 2001) are persistent and accumulate in body fat, including the breast. Some 300 have been detected in human body tissues and secretions, including breast milk (source: Lyons, G., Toxic Trespass, 1999, World Wide Fund for Nature, Godalming, UK. Applied Pharmacology, 2000, 169: p. 177-184). Of the fraction that have been tested, several thousand are listed as known or suspected carcinogens, and several hundred as damaging to the developing foetus. A chemical may not, by itself, instigate cancer but it may work with other factors to contribute towards the risk of developing the disease.

6. WEN is a national membership organisation which campaigns on environmental and health issues from a women's perspective.

7. The Ban Lindane Group consists of WEN, Unison, Pesticides Action Network UK, Friends of the Earth, the Soil Association and Green Network, Free Radicals, Breast UK.

8. Speakers at the presentation (which was closed to the public), included Jill Day - regional women's officer with Unison and co-coordinator of the 'Campaign to Ban Lindane group', Helen Lynn - Health Co-coordinator of WEN, Laura Potts Senior Tutor for Women's Studies College of Ripon and York, and Professor Andrew Watterson, chair of health in the faculty of human sciences and co-coordinator of the occupational and environmental health research group at Stirling University.