



a toxics-free future

POLLUTION AFFECTING THE LIVES OF WOMEN

By Olga Speranskaya, IPEN Co-chair

Yesterday, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between IPEN and UNEP. Its overall theme is to contribute to the work on Gender and Chemicals, through a focus on women.

Today I would like to talk about how pollution affects women because this is the constituency that I am from, and this constituency represents 50% of the world's population.

Throughout their lives, men and women are exposed to numerous harmful chemicals. But chemicals in women's body can be transferred across the placenta during fetal development and through breast milk to the nursing baby. Exposures during fetal development can cause lifelong diseases and disabilities and increase the risks of irreversible harm. Adverse effects can also be carried across multiple generations. For example, when women of child bearing age are exposed to mercury, both the woman herself and her potential children are at risk. Mercury in a woman's body can pass through placenta and transfer to her fetus during pregnancy, exposing the developing fetus to the brain damaging neurotoxin. IPEN has recently conducted a global analysis to assess the level of mercury in women of childbearing age. Hair samples of 1044 women in 37 locations across 25 countries across 6 continents were collected. Our research revealed a high level of mercury in 55% of the global sample of women, a level associated with the onset of fetal neurological damage.

Women and men both experience occupational exposures to chemicals, but these may differ based on the region, type of occupation, and access to education and information. Women typically work at the lowest level in global production systems. This feminization of poverty makes women more vulnerable to toxic chemical exposure, putting their health at risk. I will give you a few examples of occupational exposure where women face serious health problems.

Women working in agriculture represent the majority of workers involved in pesticide spraying. According to Pesticide Action Network, in some countries, *"women make up 85% or more of the pesticide applicators on commercial farms and plantations, often working whilst pregnant or breastfeeding."*

An IPEN study of rural communities with intensive pesticide application in Georgia revealed a high incidence of endocrine disorders, as well as numerous cases of reported surgeries in connection with tumours among women. In Pakistan, cotton is picked by women just 3-15 days after pesticides has been sprayed. A survey in 2012 found that 100% of these women suffered acute pesticide poisoning symptoms.

Beauty salon workers are overwhelmingly women, and are often exposed to chemicals in the products they handle. In developed countries, it is often immigrant women who work long hours, sometimes as long as 12-hours per day, in salons, and who can be exposed to harmful chemicals

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and suffer a wide range of health effects including dizziness, irritated eyes, skin and throat, asthma, miscarriages, liver and kidney damage, and cancer.

Consumer products, including cosmetics, jewels and decorations are recognized as an important source of toxic chemicals exposure. Women usually do house work using cleaning products containing chemicals and use substantially more personal care products and jewels than men. The recent study carried out by IPEN participating organization in Bangladesh, Environment and Social Development Organization, revealed high level of toxic metals in jewels, including those worn by children. Lead (Pb) concentration varied from 800 ppm to over 10,000 ppm in different jewels items with the maximum recommended level for adults of 0.03 ppm.

IPEN global campaign on heavy metals in consumer products, including cosmetics, revealed high levels of mercury in creams and lipsticks. For example, a lipstick for girls purchased in Belarus contained the highest amount of mercury with 371 ppm.

According to WHO, exposure of pregnant women to lead, including lead in paint, can also cause serious lifelong damage, such as miscarriage, stillbirth, as well as malformations. Though lead in paint is not considered a problem in developed countries anymore, IPEN's global campaign in 55 developing countries and countries in transition revealed high levels of lead in paint for internal use available on the markets of developing countries.

And finally, I would like to focus on one more source of pollution that affects women and children. This type of pollution is caused by mining and is a serious source of exposure to a variety of hazardous chemicals, including Lead, Cadmium, and Mercury that are disposed of in tailings and diffused into the air. Mining waste contaminates ground waters and makes soil infertile. Primary metals production is the key source of mercury releases into the environment in many countries.

Often enough women stand against extracting industry, fighting for the future of their children. This is what is happening now in the Southern part of Russia where a strong resistance against plans to construct a huge copper mining and processing facility was spearheaded by a mostly female group of environmental scientists who conducted environmental and health impact research to stop the mining project before it was too late to prevent the inevitable toxic exposures. According to a Russian official, if it were not for women, this plant would have already been constructed.

These and other sources of pollution affect the lives of women and their children, they may cause irreversible damage and may affect the lives of multiple generations. Now is the time for global action to prevent a pollution disaster.

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