

Breaking Barriers: Women's Leadership in Addressing Chemicals and Waste Issues

Webinar Report

June 21, 2023

**Organised by IPEN in collaboration with UNEP
and SAICM Secretariat**

Report by



for a toxics-free future

Notes:

In 2022, IPEN published a report titled [“Women Leaders: Addressing Chemicals and Waste Issues”](#) as an output of the ongoing GEF Project on Global Best Practices on Emerging Policy Issues of Concern under SAICM. The report showcased women leaders' stories working at different levels to strengthen protections against harmful chemicals.

This joint webinar conducted by IPEN, UNEP and SAICM Secretariat aimed at providing a platform for women leaders to share their experiences and insights on addressing chemicals and waste issues and practical strategies and tools to take action in their communities and organizations. By highlighting the critical role of women in addressing these challenges, the webinar aimed to inspire and empower women worldwide to take action for a more sustainable future.

Mr. Caldera Petit, UNEP, moderated the session and briefed the audience about the women leaders report. He emphasised the differentiated exposure and impacts of chemicals on women's health and how this webinar will help inspire and empower women across the world to rise, act and lead the way to protect women's health from chemical exposure.

Opening session

The webinar was opened with remarks from **Dr. Tickner**, Professor, Zuckerberg College of Health Sciences at University of Massachusetts Lowell. He highlighted his work on chemicals and their connection on breast cancer. Dr. Tickner explained that most cases of breast cancer and other cancers suffered by women are due to environmental factors. He also spoke about equity and justice and raised the concern of addressing disproportionate impacts and unique vulnerabilities that women have to chemicals. He emphasised the disparity in the data on the impact of chemicals on women's health and the degree of exposure women face from different industries and their vulnerabilities through different physiological phases in their lives.

Lastly, he highlighted the role that women play in driving change and shared examples of women who have been leading the way to protect women's health from chemicals and of women leaders who fight for women rights. He concluded his remarks by emphasising the need to have women at the forefront of sustainable chemistry, for them to be scientists, business leaders, and community organizers, noting that women need to have the power and opportunities to lead future generations.

UNEP perspectives on issues related to gender, chemicals and waste

The first presentation was shared by Ms. **Alvarez**, Chief Chemicals and Health Branch, UNEP. She began by offering her reflections as a woman who has dreams, capacities, weaknesses but most importantly, the ability to drive change. She described the extent of chemicals exposure on women's health and its transgenerational impact. She further discussed the types of chemicals exposures, both intentional and unintentional. She explained how women can be agents of change and should not be treated only as vulnerable groups, but populations with certain vulnerabilities and risks that are different depending on various factors. She shared the work done at the United Nations Environmental Programme, which is to recognize the critical role that women play in environmental governance and incorporate gender aspects and gender responses in its work. She emphasised the need to engage all people, including women and vulnerable populations in its decision-making process.

She concluded her talk by mentioning the need to combine everyone's efforts and commitments, as the best way to move forward, and highlighted that the Fifth International Conference on Chemicals Management (ICCM5) in September 2023 will be a big milestone in this process.

Integrating gender-equality into chemicals and waste policies

The next speaker, **Ms. Wingfield** from the BRS Secretariat, provided an overview of the BRS perspectives on gender and chemicals and waste management. She talked about gender mainstreaming in the chemicals and waste multi-lateral environmental agreements (MEAs), the first step of which was the development of a [gender action plan](#) in 2012, which is updated at every COP cycle. She further explained how in 2017, the BRS Secretariat approached the BRS Parties for an Omnibus decision and since then, there is a strong mandate to work on gender and implement the gender action plan. She moved on to explain more about the gender action plan and shared the activities carried out by the Secretariat.

She concluded her session by sharing a list of resources developed by the BRS Secretariat.

Women leaders and the importance of fostering women leadership

Ms. Speranskaya, from HEJ Support led the next session acknowledging the importance of women's leadership and how women leaders bring unique viewpoints and approaches to solve problems, which helps in creating a more diverse and inclusive society. She reiterated how women leaders focus on issues as health, gender equality, women's rights, and social justice, while advocating for policies that address the specific needs and challenges faced by women, leading to more equitable societies. She noted that women leaders are important for addressing issues related to toxic chemicals, particularly in women dominated sectors, including textiles, electronics, beauty, agriculture, and informal sectors.

She also talked about the exposure of chemicals and their impacts on women's health by presenting multiple examples. She focussed on how women leaders help in inspiring and empowering other women and show them that it is possible to overcome challenges related to chemicals exposure. She explained how fostering women's leadership helps challenge and break down the barriers and that when women have equal opportunities to rise to leadership positions, it promotes women's equality and sends a powerful message about the value of women's contributions and capabilities.

Lastly, she highlighted the work by IPEN women in relation to toxic exposure from chemicals and waste in different countries. These women are known around the world and they work in communities affected by toxic chemicals in various sectors, fighting gender inequalities and raising awareness. She further talked about IPEN's Women's Caucus that fosters partnerships among women professionals working in the chemicals and waste management sectors, and encourages knowledge sharing and collaboration and also joint initiatives to advance gender equality and empower women. She concluded by emphasising the need to do more work together by believing in the ability to bring real change and empower women.

Experience sharing session

1. **Women's leadership in addressing chemicals and waste issues: Kwon Young Eun, Supporters for Health and Rights of People in Semiconductor Industry (SHARPS), Korea**

Ms. Eun shared her experience of becoming aware of the problem of industrial accidents and realizing the importance of preventive activities. Through this, she became interested in the local community and environmental pollution issues, noting that she focuses on the issue of women workers in the semiconductor and electronics industry.

In her presentation, she described how women are at risk from toxic exposures in the semiconductor and electronics industry. She explained how women working in this sector have a significantly higher rate of miscarriages and infertility, and are prone to cancer and many other diseases as compared to women in the general workforce. She informed the audience that most women workers at Samsung, Korea who have reported occupational diseases to SHARPS are in their 20s and 30s. They have reported breast and ovarian cancer,

irregular periods, miscarriages, and infertility and the children of these women are also suffering from many disorders. She shared stories of women workers and their children suffering from multiple health issues due to chemical exposures. She further talked about how SHARPS has been fighting to protect women workers and create a workers' compensation system. She explained that due to SHARPS persistent advocacy efforts, Korea amended its regulations in July 2021 and now women workers can receive workers' compensation benefits for their children's health issues.

She concluded her session with information about a [book](#) published by SHARPS in 2022 on women workers' health rights and the health impacts on their children, which contains interviews with victims and the experiences and concerns of expert activists.

2. Oruba Al-Refa'i, Hands for Environment and Sustainable Development, Jordan

Ms. Al-Refa'i focussed her talk on her experiences in developing the Women and Chemicals report with the IPEN team. She began her story by sharing her diagnosis of breast cancer at the young age of 24. This led her to research the causes of breast cancer. She discovered how chemical exposures are linked to hormonal imbalances and may contribute to an increased risk for breast cancer. She found scientific evidence that supports the role of numerous lifestyle, genetic, physiological, and pharmaceutical risk factors in breast cancer pathogenesis, and she noted that some positive associations have also been found with environmental and occupational exposures. Indeed, studies show that employment in different sectors, like farming, plastic production, metal working, chemical and rubber manufacturing, and healthcare increases the risk of breast tumors.

She further shared her journey from working as a volunteer to then having the opportunity to participate in the Stockholm Convention, which helped her learn and grow. Lastly, she established her organization - Hands for Environment and Sustainable Development, with a mission to raise awareness on POPs and toxins and find solutions to protect women's health from the impacts of such chemicals.

She moved on to talk about the various projects that she has worked on, including the issue of asbestos in talcum powder, toxins in children's toys and food packaging, and a course on women and chemicals that she developed with IPEN on toxins used in beauty products.

She described how women face greater risks from chemical exposures and experience higher rates of adverse health outcomes. She shared a report which found that a newborn has an average of 200 chemicals in their system. She concluded her session by explaining the strategies that she adopted, which include positive thinking, alliance with experts, collaborating with external organizations, non-profits, and educational institutions, and youth engagement.

3. Diene Maimouna Ndeye, Pesticide Action Network (PAN), Senegal

Ms. Ndeye started her presentation by sharing her experience with women exposed to toxic chemicals in Senegal and how their exposures to chemicals and health concerns are different from men, including facing miscarriages at gold mining sites and bearing children who are born with disabilities.

She began her presentation by sharing her experience of 10 years working on gender equality and chemicals management. She further talked about her work on training women on these issues, including providing them with information on the technical issues related to toxic chemicals and with the tools to address these issues. She moved on to talk about her work

with different partners on campaigns, such as the 16 Days of Global Action, and with radio programs, press conferences, and working to empower women in their role in waste management.

She emphasised that there has been a lack of training and equipment for women working in the chemicals and waste sectors as well as the lack of data on hazardous chemicals and their impact on women. She concluded by highlighting her work on raising awareness of these issues and with decision makers to be part of those discussions at the policy levels.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS SESSION

Participants had the opportunity to ask questions to the panelists. One of the questions was:

In recent years, more and more women are becoming interested in and part of discussions on chemical pollution issues, particularly in developing countries and though NGOs visibly encourage this, it is not sufficient. We know the role that BRS Conventions play in chemical management but the BRS Conventions do not directly support women's groups, NGOs led by women, and other women's organizations to carry out these types of projects in their countries. Would it be possible for the BRS Secretariat to launch project calls for women leaders from the Global South?

Susan Wingfield from the BRS Secretariat addressed this question by saying that the Conventions are open to observers during COPs. She said that the Secretariat does not support NGOs or observers at the moment but it is under discussion.

Agenda of the webinar:

Time	Topic	Speaker
13:00- 13:10	Opening remarks	Joel Tickner, Ph.D., Professor, Zuckerberg College of Health Sciences
13:10-13:20	UNEP perspectives on issues related to gender and chemicals and waste	Jacqueline Alvarez, Chief Chemicals & Health Branch, UNEP
13:20-13:30	Integrating gender equality into chemicals and waste policies	Susan Wingfield, Programme Management Officer, BRS Secretariat
13:30-13:40	Women leaders and the importance of Fostering women leadership	Olga Speranskaya, IPEN Senior Advisor and Co-Director, Health and Environment Justice Support (HEJ Support)
13:40-14:10	Experience sharing session by speakers from the case study report	Kwon Young Eun, Supporters for Health and Rights of People in Semiconductor Industry (SHARPS), Korea Oruba Al-Refa'i, Hands for Environment and Sustainable Development, Jordan Diene Maimouna Ndeye, Pesticide Action Network (PAN), Senegal
14:10-14:30	Q&A session	All panelists Moderated by Eduardo Caldera Petit

Video of the webinar:

[Full webinar](#) - in English, video and audio

[Spanish version](#) - audio only

[French version](#) - audio only

Presentations can be viewed [here](#).