

Women call for better protection from hazardous chemicals worldwide

WECF releases “Women and Chemicals” publication and calls for more political action for better health protection from harmful chemicals

In our modern societies, women and men are all continually exposed to hazardous chemicals in their every day lives. But women are often differently exposed due to their (entrenched) gender roles and because of biological susceptibilities and health impacts. WECF, an international network of civil society organisations working for a healthy environment and gender-just society in over 50 countries, presents therefore at International Women’s Day 2016 a deeper look at the nexus between gender roles and women’s exposure to hazardous chemicals worldwide with its publication of “[*Women and Chemicals*](#)”.

In this publication WECF looks at the impacts of e.g. highly hazardous pesticides, mercury, and endocrine disrupting chemicals on women’s health. *Women and Chemicals* was developed with support and expertise from the United Nations, civil society and scientific institutes. The views expressed in the publication are WECF’s.

Hazardous chemicals can be found in the air we breathe, in the food we eat, in the water we drink. People are largely unaware of this daily chemical exposure. The negative impact of these chemicals affects the environment and human health and can cause a number of lifelong and irreversible diseases and chronic ailments.

The World Health Organisation has established links between hazardous chemicals and the increased risk of breast cancer. It estimates that around 1.7 million women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in 2020.^[1]

Women are exposed to a range of hazardous chemicals at home and at work. The publication looks at specific cases in all parts of the world such as women as pesticide sprayers, waste pickers, house cleaners, employed in the plastics industry etc., and as consumers of products which contain toxins. It analyses the issues from an intersectional perspective, and recognises that different regions have to deal with different problems. Exposure to toxic chemicals can lead to serious health effects, such as (breast) cancer, diabetes or infertility.

Corinne Lepage, Former French environment minister and chair of the WECF Board of Trustees, says: “I am worried especially about hormone disrupting chemicals. Although we know about the threat to environment and human health, the EU Commission so far has not been able to regulate EDCs. In particular women and men who are planning to have children, need to be better protected from and informed about EDCs. This report is a good starting point to show the linkage between chemical exposure of women and increasing rates of diseases and that political action is needed now.”

Alexander Nies, SAICM President, welcomes the publication *Women and Chemicals*. “SAICM is the ideal multi-stakeholder process to address cross-cutting issues like women and chemicals. SAICM emerging issues and projects such as Chemicals in Products, Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs) and Highly Hazardous Pesticides address the protection of vulnerable groups, such as women. Now we need to bring the projects into practice.”

Some substances such as endocrine disrupting chemicals can also have negative impacts on very young children. This was also affirmed by statements in 2015 from the International Federation of Gynaecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) and the Endocrine Society.^[2] FIGO, who pointed out that “exposure to toxic environmental chemicals during pregnancy is ubiquitous and is a threat to healthy human reproduction (....) while babies are born ‘pre-polluted.’”^[3]

FIGO and the Endocrine Society both urged political action has to be taken.

Alexandra Caterbow, WECF concludes, “in this report we focused on women, because often men’s health impacts are already better known, from reduced sperm-counts to testicular cancer and genital malformations.⁴ We call on urgent legislative measures to better protect the health of women, men and children from hazardous chemicals. Immediate steps have to be taken to end use of highly hazardous pesticides, to strictly regulate EDCs such as Bisphenol A from consumer products and packaging, to ban mercury use in artisanal small gold mining, and to promote the use of safer substitutes and non-chemical alternatives”

To celebrate the launch of this publication, WECF will be hosting an Ask Me Anything (AMA) on Reddit where we will invite the general public to ask us questions on the findings of the report.

<http://www.wecf.eu/english/articles/2016/03/women-chemicals.php>

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