

INTRODUCTION

The adverse effects of hazardous chemicals and wastes on different groups of the population vary depending on the level of exposure, behavioural patterns, age, biological effect (for example, endocrine disruption), geographical location, nutritional status and co-exposure to other chemicals. Certain types of chemicals, such as persistent organic pollutants (POPs), can build up to dangerous levels in humans and wildlife causing adverse reproductive, developmental, immunological, hormonal, and carcinogenic effects with varied impacts on vulnerable groups of the population.

Low-income pregnant women and children in developing countries are particularly vulnerable to toxics and their exposure to certain chemicals can compromise the ability of children to escape poverty through education and work.¹ Women comprise 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force, while some 60 per cent of child labourers aged 5 to 17 years work in agriculture often in informal, low-paid or unremunerated jobs and under poor working conditions.² Pesticides are among the most severe hazards children and adults are exposed to in agriculture.³

Children are particularly susceptible to the negative health impacts of chemicals due to their rapid growth and development and greater exposure relative to body weight. They are exposed to chemicals in the womb, during their most sensitive developmental phase, and later born into a world polluted by chemicals. For example, methyl mercury exposure in utero and early in life can result in mental retardation (IQ loss), seizures, vision and hearing loss, delayed development, language disorders and memory loss. Breastfeeding can transfer further toxic chemicals from mother to child. Prenatal and early childhood exposure to lead, for instance, can result in demonstrable decreased intelligence and alterations in attention and behaviour that are irreversible and result in diminished economic and social productivity over the entire lifespan of the affected person.⁴

¹ IFCS, *Poverty Reduction and the Sound Management of Chemicals: A Thought Starter* (2006), p. 12.

² ILO and UNCTAD, *Shared Harvests: Agriculture, Trade and Employment* (2013), p. v and ILO, "Agriculture, an engine of pro-poor rural growth," 2011, p.1, online: http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_165994.pdf.

³ ILO, "The impact of pesticide exposure on child labourers in agriculture," 22 June 2011, online: http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/features/WCMS_158425/lang--en/index.htm

⁴ See Keml report, 2005, supra note 17, p.18 and Caravanos, Jack et al, "The burden of disease from paediatric lead exposure at hazardous waste sites in 7 Asian countries," *Environmental Research* 120 (2013) 119–125, p.120.

Considering the strong linkages between gender and exposure to hazardous chemicals and wastes as well as the importance of incorporating gender perspectives in the chemicals and waste agenda, the Secretariat of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm (BRS) Conventions has been making efforts to integrate the gender dimension into the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of its activities as well as to promote gender equality internally.

For gender equality to become an integral part of the implementation of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions, including the secretariat activities, is the vision which BRS has been striving to attain⁵.

Gender issues related to implementation of the conventions have been discussed by the Conferences of the Parties to the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions, particularly the impact of the potentially harmful effects of certain chemicals and wastes on vulnerable groups such as women and young children. The issue of gender mainstreaming was also raised at the ordinary and extraordinary meetings of the Conferences of the Parties to the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions in May 2013 in the Executive Secretary's proposal for the organization of the Secretariats of the three conventions⁶ and in a document on mainstreaming gender in the Secretariat⁷.

Recognising the need to promote gender equality both within the Secretariat and externally, in line with applicable United Nations and UNEP rules, regulations, and policies as to gender, in July 2012 the Executive Secretary established the BRS Gender Task Team to develop targets and an approach to gender mainstreaming within the BRS Secretariat. The BRS Gender Task Team was also to liaise with the UNEP Gender Task Team established in July 2012 by the Executive Director of UNEP to deal with a range of policy issues and recommend strategic direction for the UNEP Gender Programme.

In 2013, the BRS Gender Task Team developed an action plan (Gender Action Plan (BRS-GAP))⁸ that includes a vision, a list of expected short, medium and long-term goals and activities, and monitoring and reporting modalities. The ultimate goal of BRS-GAP is to incorporate gender equality into achieving the common objective of the conventions, namely protecting human health and the environment. It is also hoped that the BRS-GAP will lead to a greater

⁵ <http://synergies.pops.int/ManagementReports/Gender/BRSGenderActionPlan/tabid/3652/language/en-US/Default.aspx>

⁶ Document UNEP/FAO/CHW/RC/POPS/EXCOPS.2/INF/7

⁷ Document UNEP/FAO/CHW/RC/POPS/EXCOPS.2/INF/25

⁸ <http://synergies.pops.int/ManagementReports/Gender/BRSGenderActionPlan/tabid/3652/language/en-US/Default.aspx>

recognition of the links between gender, poverty and hazardous chemicals and wastes.

In the lead up to the 2015 COPs gender mainstreaming discussion⁹, the Secretariat requested Parties and others to submit stories on how gender issues are considered in and impacted by hazardous chemicals and waste management at the local, national and regional levels. The stories in this publication have been selected as they raise issues of chemicals and wastes management of particular relevance to gender and highlight actions taken at the individual and community level to protect the most vulnerable segments of our population from the potentially harmful effects of certain chemicals and wastes.

⁹ Documents UNEP/CHW.12/INF/49, UNEP/FAO/RC/COP.7/INF/33, UNEP/POPS/COP.7/INF/54