

# Changing the way we use chemicals

HEJSupport stands for all women and girls globally to achieve gender equality, environmental and health justice

## *WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW TO PROTECT YOUR HEALTHS*

POISON PREVENTION WEEK

27 MAY 2021

A LIVE WEBINAR ON CHEMICAL TOXINS THAT ARE SPECIFIC TO WOMEN'S HEALTH

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## About us

Health and Environment Justice Support is a non-profit organization dedicated to achieving a healthy environment and environmental justice for people and communities affected by chemical pollution and related environmental degradation.

HEJSupport provides long term technical, policy, legal and awareness support for environmentally deprived groups to enable them to make their problems heard and to strive for solutions.

[www.hej-support.org](http://www.hej-support.org)

# Why women?



## Women

- represent the half of the world's population
- 70% of the 1.3 billion poor;
- work 2/3 of the world's working hours;
- receive only 10 % of the world's income;
- own only 1-2 % of the world's property;
- receive up to 80 % less than men pay for the same job, in the same position

**More facts of gender inequality**



# Women's rights violation

Human rights violation remains a serious challenge;

The industry's workforce is largely made up of low-skilled women ;

Difficult working conditions;

Low wages, lack of health insurance, lack of safety at work

Fear of losing their jobs

Long working hours

No information on toxic chemicals applied at workplace;

Toxic exposure continues at home

- Textile and garment sector
- Electronics industry
- Beauty Salons
- Agriculture
- Informal sector (ASGM, e-waste)



**STORIES FROM THE CLEAN ROOM**

A DOCUMENTARY ABOUT WORKERS WHO ARE DYING TO MAKE THE ELECTRONICS WE CANNOT LIVE WITHOUT

**DONATE**

**THE MOVIE**

*Stories from the Clean Room* is a documentary from South Korea revealing the dirty secrets of the electronics industry. Twenty-three former factory workers tell their personal stories of toxic workplace exposures, corporate malfeasance, and their fight for justice.

**WATCH THE TRAILER**

- Women are  
underrepresented in:
- decision making bodies
  - science
  - leadership positions



## Women underrepresented in science:

SDG #5

Gender equality  
is a human right

and a prerequisite for peace & progress

Policy makers and people around the world should show support and commitment to the implementation of [Sustainable Development Goal 5 \(SDG5\)](#) to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

# Can women be empowered if they are exposed to the worlds' most dangerous toxins at work and at home?

- Are women and girls educated and aware enough to protect themselves from exposure to toxic chemicals?
- Do women and men have equal access to health care? Is the difference in exposure routes between men and women recognized?
- Is gender-disaggregated data considered an important factor in health and environmental decision-making?



# Women give lives

Women are the first environment of their children. By protecting women we are protecting the future of the Planet



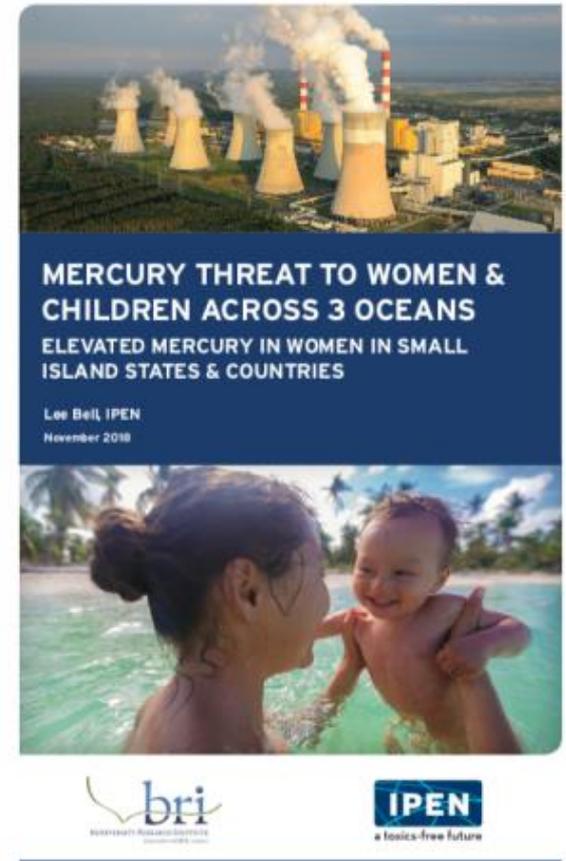
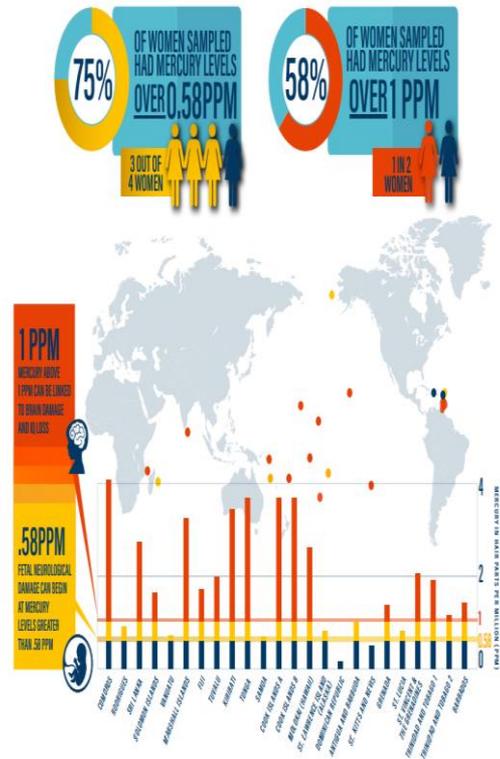
- Women can pass chemicals to children during pregnancy and breast feeding
- Some chemicals cross the placenta barrier or can be found in breast milk
- Prenatal exposure can lead to health problems later in life

Here are some examples:



# Elevated Mercury in Women of Child-Bearing Age in 21 Small Island States & Countries

## MERCURY THREAT TO WOMEN & CHILDREN IN 21 SMALL ISLANDS & COUNTRIES



[FINAL Infographic 1 \(ipen.org\)](https://www.ipen.org)

Yuyun Ismawati, Founder of  
BaliFocusNexus3 visiting a family in  
ASGM community, Indonesia



# Mercury impact on health in ASGM communities

## Gender aspects in ASGM in Indonesia

- Exposure routes ( at home, in the village, via food, air)
- Health consequences (children)
- Gender roles (division of labour, income generation)
- Societal factors (women blamed of being witched, health care)

### Examples of activities

- Awareness raising and capacity building for women
- Information about sources of mercury exposure
- Information about mercury health effects

### Examples for indicators:

- Nb of women informed
- Nb of women who decided to move out to a safer place
- NB of families who stopped practicing mercury evaporation at home /backyard

### Examples of gender disaggregated data

- Information about sick children /adults/women related to mercury exposure (which diseases, what age, treatment?)
- Number of families/women with ball mills at home
- NB of women practicing mercury evaporation at home

# PFAS impact on health

Toxic PFAS chemicals threaten

- Fertility
- Reproductive health
- Child development.

**PFAS chemicals cross through the placenta and harm the developing fetus**





# Why gender difference matters?

It is important to recognise factors which make women more vulnerable:

- Biological factors
- Occupational exposure
- Exposure through consumer products

**Ideas for solution**

# Why women?

## Biological factors

### Different susceptibility and likelihood of exposure to various toxic substances

- vulnerable windows: puberty, pregnancy, lactation, menopause
- more fatty tissue



# Why women?

## Occupational exposure and exposure through consumer products

- Different professions (some sectors are dominated by women-workers, exposure continues at home)
- Different consumer products (some products are designed specifically for women)





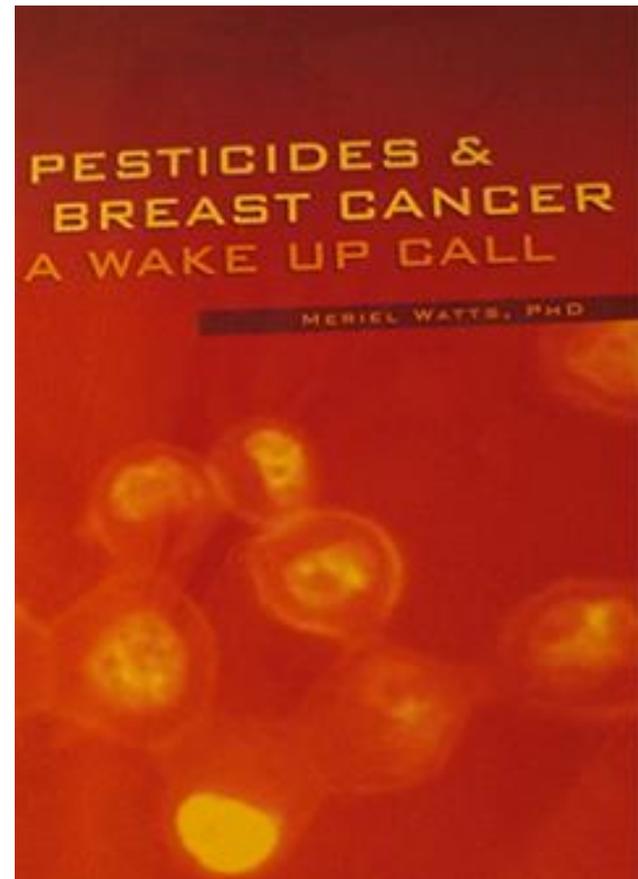
# Women at the workplace

- Occupational health and safety risks for women are often underestimated because test and standards are based on male populations (**gender disaggregated data is needed**).
- For many sectors there is not enough information about the substances women are exposed to at the workplace (**lack of transparency**)
- Example: women in plastics industry have a fivefold increase in pre-menopausal breast cancer
- Not enough protecting regulation in place
- Women in informal sector are in danger
- [Exposure to hazardous chemicals at work and resulting health impacts – ILO report](#)

# Women in agriculture

Many women:

- spray pesticides (30.000 alone in Malaysia);
  - weed while pesticides are being applied (cotton fields in Uzbekistan);
  - wash out pesticide containers ;
  - wash pesticide-soaked clothes;
  - store pesticides in their homes
- [Books | Pesticide Action Network Aotearoa New Zeland \(pananz.net\)](#)



# Informal women workers in e-waste recycling

## Dominated by:

- Unskilled women-workers;
- Poor

## Where does the exposure occur:

- In the home
- In the backyard
- In the street
- Contaminated clothes, skin

## Exposure to e-waste:

- Heavy metals
- Brominated flame retardants
- EDCs
- Persistent organic pollutants

## Contamination of food chain

Alarming high levels of some of the most hazardous chemicals on earth, including dioxins, brominated dioxins, PCBs, PBDE, and SCCPs in the eggs of chickens that had foraged in areas where electronic waste was burned to recover metal.

## SDG Fact:

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**ELECTRONIC WASTE GREW BY 38% IN 2020, BUT LESS THAN 20% IS RECYCLED. INFORMAL E-WASTE RECYCLERS ARE EXPOSED TO DANGEROUS CHEMICALS.**

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SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production

# Textile industry is dominated by women-workers

- In China 70% of the workers in the textile sector are women
- In Cambodia women comprises up to 90% of workers employed in the garment sector



# Hazardous chemicals in textile products

- For every kilogram of fabric, an estimated 0.58kg of various chemicals are used.
- 0.35–1.5kg of chemicals go into the production of 1kg of cotton textiles.
- Dyeing processes alone usually involve more than 1600 different chemicals, including formaldehyde, phthalates, perfluorinated and polyfluorinated compounds (*PFCs*).
- Some of these substance are persistent organic pollutants and endocrine disrupting chemicals

**Azo dyes** are one of the most commonly used dyes, comprising of 60-70% of dyes in use. Azo dyes can release a compound that is a known carcinogen. The most toxic compounds have been banned in the EU.

**Brominated and chlorinated flame retardants** are used to help fireproof clothing and can be found in children's clothing. Flame retardants can cause thyroid disruption, memory and learning problems, delayed mental and physical development, lower IQ, advanced puberty and reduced fertility.

**Formaldehyde** is used to keep clothes wrinkle-free and shrink-free and is a known respiratory irritant and carcinogen.

**Heavy metals** are found in dyes and leather tanning, and can cause nervous system damage, kidney damage, and/or be carcinogenic, depending on the heavy metal.

**Perfluorinated chemicals** are used to make clothing waterproof and stainproof. PFCs can affect liver health and disrupt hormonal functions.

<https://www.greenamerica.org/toxic-textiles-faqs>

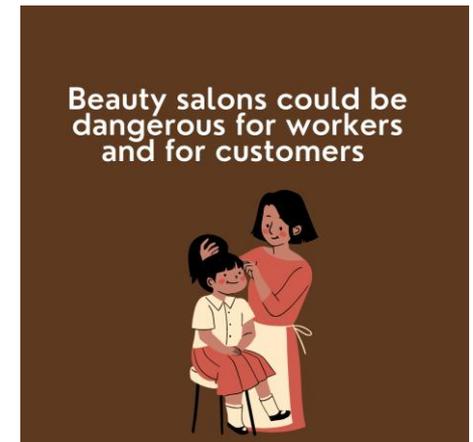
# Examples of negative health consequences for women in textile sector

- Women who work in textile factories and are exposed to synthetic fibres (acrylic, nylon) and petroleum products at work before their mid-30s: at risk of developing breast cancer later in life (Labreche 2010).
- A study of female textile workers in Shanghai, China found an elevated risk of a spontaneously aborted first pregnancy associated with exposure to synthetic fibres and mixed synthetic and natural fibres (Wong et al 2009)
- A research on pregnant garment workers in Bangladesh concludes that they develop hypertensive disorders and are under enormous stress (Akhter et al 2017)



# Beauty salons

- Beauty salon workers are overwhelmingly women:
- exposed to chemicals in the products they handle;
- work long hours, sometimes as long as 12-hours a day;
- minimum or no protective measures;
- suffer a wide range of health effects, including asthma, miscarriages, and even cancer



# Products for women

- Hygienic products
- Clothes

## WOMEN AS CONSUMERS

**WOMEN HAVE  
POWER TO  
INFLUENCE THE  
MARKET VIA THE  
PRODUCTS THEY  
BUY OR THEY  
DECIDED NOT TO  
BUY**





# A global platform for information [www.ptfperiod.info](http://www.ptfperiod.info) #ptfperiod

**Plastic and Toxic Free Period**

ABOUT POLICY SCIENCE ALTERNATIVES YOUNG FEMALES HEALTH ENVIRONMENT **IN THE MEDIA** PERSPECTIVES

ACTION PARTNERS

In the Media

**Environ-menstrual Advocates**

The Guardian features some of our partners, in an article by Anna Turns. Publication available at: [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/02/the-women-taking-the-plastic-out-of-periods?utm\\_source=dlvr.it&utm\\_medium=twitter](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/02/the-women-taking-the-plastic-out-of-periods?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter)

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Women's Environmental Network

WOMEN'S VOICES FOR THE EARTH

جمعية التوعية البيئية للأجيال القادمة AEEFG

#ptfperiod, #periodaction, #PlasticFreePeriods, #periodwithoutplastic

Positive Health+Life 23h

We must work together to reduce if not eliminate #periodwaste #EndPeriodPlastic #PlasticFreePeriods if you don't want it polluting the world... why let it pollute your insides?

Go organic, go reusable & have a #happyperiod

# Join the global conversation

- Link your social media channels @ptfperiod
- Share your stories and materials on the website
- Tell us why the topic is important for you / in your country
- Lessons you learned while introducing the topic to your community or constituency
- Your personal experience using safer alternatives

AND MORE

[www.ptfperiod.info](http://www.ptfperiod.info)



# Mercury in skin lightening creams

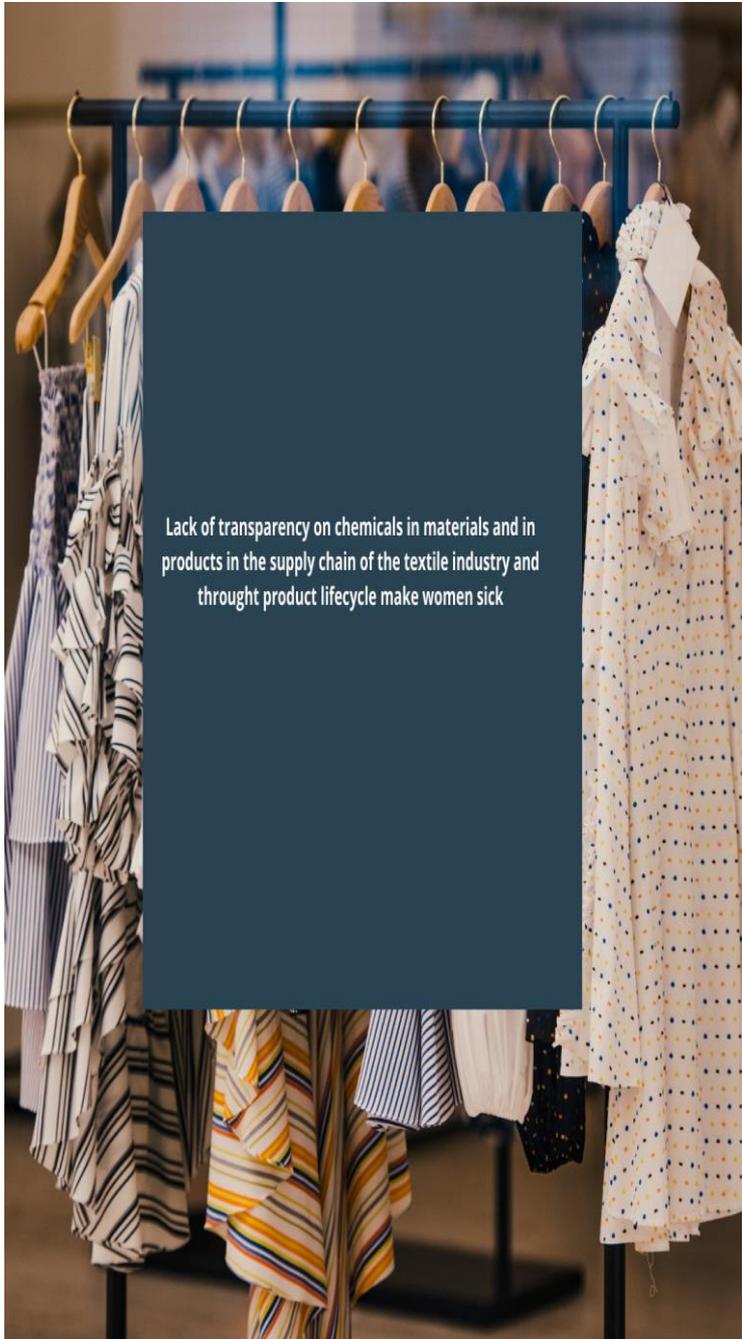
- 2017, Manila, the Philippines: Out of 35 cosmetic products tested, 33 were found to contain mercury up to 46,000 ppm.
- 2018, Manila, the Philippines: - 15 cosmetic products found to be contaminated with mercury in the range of 710 to 30,000 ppm.
- 2021: Manila, the Philippines: Of the 65 samples screened for mercury, 40 were found to contain mercury above 1 ppm; of which 38 had mercury above 1,000 ppm; 25 contained mercury above 5,000 ppm; 19 were laden with mercury above 15,000 ppm; and 5 were loaded with mercury above 25,000 ppm.
- [Groups Raise the Alarm over Continued Sale of Dangerous Skin Whitening Creams Laced with Mercury | IPEN](#)
- [Toxic Expose: Online Trade of Mercury-Containing Skin Whitening Cosmetics in the Philippines | IPEN](#)



## Clothes

Women  
deserve to  
know what  
chemicals are  
in clothes  
they make  
and wear

Although the problems caused by many chemicals are well recognized, potential issues of their presence in fabrics have not been widely studied and there is limited information available to consumers.



Lack of transparency on chemicals in materials and in products in the supply chain of the textile industry and throughout product lifecycle make women sick

# Textiles can harm your health

- Polyester fibers are usually derived from petroleum, are non-biodegradable, contain harmful chemicals, release microplastic.
- Rayon is a fiber that is made from [cellulose](#) that is chemically converted from wood pulp. Not only is the production of this material dangerous, but wearing it can also be unhealthy. Rayon fabric can [emit](#) toxic substances that can cause nausea, headaches, vomiting, chest and muscle pain, and insomnia. In addition to all that, its production is heavily [polluting](#) the environment.



# Labels may mislead consumers

Many labels can be found on clothing which may confuse consumers or distract their attention from the most important labels.

It is very hard, if not impossible, to make informed consumption choices:

BECAUSE no-one, not even many brands themselves, know what chemicals are in their products

This is why we need more transparency inside and outside the supply chain



# What labels on textile products do women need?

## Examples for labels

[www.ecolabelindex.com](http://www.ecolabelindex.com)

[www.textilestandards.com](http://www.textilestandards.com)

The ITC Standards Map

<http://www.standardsmap.org/identify>

FSC certification ensures that products come from responsibly managed forests that provide environmental, social and economic benefits.

<https://cfda.com/resources/materials/detail/rayon-viscose>

PEFC certification offers many benefits: from highlighting sustainable procurement choices to meeting demanding legislative and market requirements. <https://www.pefc.org/>

<https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/germany-green-button-certification-launched>

How should consumers know which labels they can trust?

- reliability of labels
- chemical ingredients in products
- sustainability statements
- working conditions at production sites
- justification and audit of information available on brand and company websites compared to information provided on product labels

# How to provide sustainability information



HEJSupport analysed the provision of product sustainability information from various brands, using the UN-Environment and ITC 2017 Guidelines for Providing Product Sustainability Information.

For the first time the Guidelines function as an analysing tool for a whole industry sector.

<https://hej-support.org/new-report-sustainable-fashion-how-companies-provide-sustainability-information-to-consumers/>

<https://sustainfashion.info/>

<https://sustainfashion.info/de>

Everything  
you need  
to know  
what your  
clothes are  
made of

# SUSTAINABLE FASHION

Everything you want to know about the sustainability of the textile and fashion industry



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#circulareconom  
#circularfashion!

# What do women need?

- Equal rights at all levels everywhere

- Ensure all projects include activities on gender

## Examples of activities

- Product testing
- Awareness raising activities focused on women
- Advocacy activities with a focus on women's health

- Develop gender sensitive indicators

## Examples for indicators:

- Number of harmful products revealed
- Number of available alternatives revealed
- Number of women that know about ingredients in products
- Women's opinion about the quality of labelling
- Change of sales figures after campaign

- More gender disaggregated data

## Examples of gender disaggregated data

- Types of products and why women use them
- Health impact of targeted chemicals in products on women

- Outreach to other groups

- Policy change to ensure better regulatory protection

# Women as agents for change

## Stand

- Stand up for women's rights

## Form

- Form unions

## Form

- Form women worker's committees

## Increase

- Increase awareness and education

## Ensure

- Ensure gender equality

## Promote

- Promote women's leadership





Thank you for your attention!

## Contact

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