

**Input on Gender and Toxics Thematic Report**

**For the UN Special Rapporteur on Toxics and Human Rights**

March 29, 2024

[Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific](https://panap.net/)’s (PANAP’s) submission draws upon the work of PANAP and its partners on the impacts of hazardous pesticides on women, highlights our evidence-based documentation, case studies, and analysis through our [Community-based Pesticide Action Monitoring](https://panap.net/about-cpam/) (CPAM) over the years.

1. **Background**

Today, an estimated 385 million people or 44% of the world’s farmers suffer unintentional acute pesticide poisonings every year including around 11,000 fatalities, with this figure rising to 51% in Southeast Asia and 65% in South Asia.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This figure does not include the chronic effects of pesticides such as cancers, immune system malfunction, birth defects, damage to the brains of small children and infertility. Gender-disaggregated data is unfortunately often lacking for occupational exposure to hazardous chemicals.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. **Gendered impacts of pesticides**

Women working in commercial farms and plantations are exposed to pesticides through various ways: spraying, mixing, applying, washing pesticide containers and pesticide-soaked clothes and storing pesticides. They work long hours in fields and plantations that have been sprayed; standing for long hours in water contaminated with pesticides; carry heavy and leaky spraying equipment; and are exposed to pesticides often stored within the home premises, in the course of their household chores.

This was evidenced by PANAP’s 2018 study[[3]](#footnote-3) in seven countries across Asia, where over 600 women participated in CPAM. The study confirmed the use of Highly Hazardous Pesticides (HHPs).[[4]](#footnote-4) Findings include women in Pakistan mixing granular pesticides with their bare hands, abnormal menstrual flows and high incidences of still births and miscarriages among plantation workers in Indonesia and the Philippines. It is common for women workers to continue spraying pesticides while pregnant. For instance, one study among tea plantation workers in Southern India found that 68% of women continued to work up to six months into pregnancy.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Women’s susceptibility to the effects of pesticides differs from men.[[6]](#footnote-6) Women generally have a higher proportion of body fat, and are more likely to store pollutants that bioaccumulate in fat tissue. Women may also absorb pesticides through their skin more easily, and once there, fat-loving pesticides may reside in the body longer. Pesticides adversely affect women’s fertility and reproductive health, with both known and unknown impacts on future generations. Exposure during pregnancy may harm the unborn child. Pesticides may also affect the gene expressions and inherited physiological traits.[[7]](#footnote-7)

1. **Health and labour violations of women plantation workers**

The 2023 study[[8]](#footnote-8) conducted by PANAP partner Tenaganita documented the risks and vulnerabilities that women face in the palm oil plantations and in their homes.

*Occupational health and safety hazards*

The women agricultural workers, including new hires, were not properly briefed on the dangers posed by the chemicals used. While some plantations provide personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves, shoes and coveralls, they are seldom used due to discomfort and heat. Cloth gloves and masks are sometimes used as alternatives, which heightens exposure through absorption. Many women suffer from skin rashes due to prolonged exposure.

Women also suffer from other health issues such as prolapsed wombs, severe back pain, intense headaches, sore shoulders and aches in their hips and legs from carrying heavy bags of chemical inputs. The women also notice immediate health effects, including rashes on their thighs, eye irritations, gastritis, throat infections, genital boils and itches with abnormal vaginal discharges. One woman shared that she fainted after spraying fertilisers.

The lack of proper water and sanitation facilities also pose a problem for women working in plantations. Women often avoid relieving themselves to avoid having their genitals exposed to chemicals sprayed on crops, risks of encountering dangerous animals or fear of being seen by others. Menstruating women are unable to change or properly dispose their pads during work hours, leaving them exposed to risks of urinary tract infections, abdominal pains, and inflammations.

The local and migrant women interviewed expressed further deplorable conditions with low salaries compared to men, lack of medical benefits and access to adequate healthcare, injury and death compensations. Estate clinics only provide basic medication which are often inefficient remedies. It is much worse for migrant workers who are most often undocumented, without valid work permits and have restricted movements because employers have confiscated their passports. Such abuses, including on mental health, exacerbate their already grim situation.

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| *Case study:*  *Midah\* is a young woman from a rural village in Jawa Timur in Indonesia who dreams of a better life for herself and her family. She decided to migrate to Malaysia in search of employment opportunities to support her impoverished family. She was promised a job in a plantation estate and a decent salary by a recruiter in her home country. However, upon arriving in the destination country, Midah quickly realised that the situation was not as promised.*  *She was left in debt to cover transportation and accommodation costs with all her earnings being paid to the agent. Trapped in debt bondage, Midah faced constant financial pressure and insecurity, leading to stress, powerlessness, fear and isolation.*  *\*Not her real name* |

*Women’s marginalisation and discrimination*

Women are exposed to pesticides not merely in the fields and through spraying, but also through a variety of chores at home and family care. Women’s exposure to pesticides increases as their poverty and marginalisation deepens. This is especially true in rural communities where landlessness and neoliberal policies condemn small-scale farmers to chemical-intensive farming incentivised by governments, or to hazardous labour in monoculture plantations. Poverty also further increases women’s vulnerability to pesticides, as toxic effects are aggravated by poor diet and malnutrition (women still “eat last and eat least” in impoverished families).

Due to the patriarchal construct, women are relegated to a lower status and discriminated against. For instance, medical professionals, pesticide company or plantation owners would blame women workers for being sick or having poor hygiene when they complain about itchiness, rather than a result of pesticide poisoning.[[9]](#footnote-9) Women in agriculture especially those in the informal sector remain invisible and not included in government trainings, plannings, and budgeting.

1. **Lack of Accountability of Agrochemical Corporations**

In 2017, in Yavatmal, Maharashtra, India, PANAP partner, PAN India documented that 23 farmers and agricultural workers were poisoned and died from spraying pesticides in Bt cotton fields.[[10]](#footnote-10) The onus is put on farmers and workers who used these products, even though they were instructed to use them without any training and information on the products’ hazards.

The burden has been left with the widows and children to pay off debts and make ends meet amid the stigma after the death of their husbands. The children often drop out of school as their mothers could not afford to pay fees and work to help the family instead.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In September 2020, PAN India, PANAP, the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR) and Public Eye together with the Maharashtra Association of Pesticide Poisoned Persons (MAPPP), filed a complaint[[12]](#footnote-12) with the Swiss NCP for the [OECD Guidelines](https://www.seco.admin.ch/seco/en/home/Aussenwirtschaftspolitik_Wirtschaftliche_Zusammenarbeit/Wirtschaftsbeziehungen/nachhaltigkeit_unternehmen/oecd-guidelines.html).[[13]](#footnote-13) Quoting from the complaint, “the complainants demanded that Syngenta provides financial compensation to a group of 51 affected farmers and that it adopts meaningful measures to prevent future cases of poisoning”.

To date, Syngenta denies any responsibility for the events, but official police records from local authorities show that 96 cases of poisoning, two of which led to fatalities, were linked to the Syngenta insecticide, Polo (active ingredient, Diafenthiuron).[[14]](#footnote-14) No agreement was reached both on “remedy for the harm caused to dozens of Indian farmers and measures to prevent future poisonings, demonstrating the need for binding rules to hold companies accountable and prevent human rights violations before they occur.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Governments too have failed as duty bearers in upholding the people’s rights to health and to a safe environment by allowing these pesticides to continue harming farmers and polluting the environment.

In the Tenaganita study in 2023[[16]](#footnote-16), one of the pesticides used by the women workers is Gramoxone (paraquat) which is banned. In 2002, Malaysia banned paraquat but was rescinded in 2006 due to industry pressure. Finally, paraquat was banned in 2020. However, PANAP’s 2023 investigative report[[17]](#footnote-17) revealed that paraquat (including 2 other HHPs endosulfan and profenophos) are openly sold on e-commerce platforms in Malaysia.

The right to information on pesticides that the farmers and workers use or to which they are exposed are constantly violated. Selling pesticides in unlabelled packages, lacking labels in local languages, removal of labels in containers, and irresponsible advertising that products are for cleaner crops are serious violations of the [International Code of Conduct on Pesticide Management](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789251085493). Governments that have agreed to adhere to this Code should implement its provisions.

1. **Tools for Women’s Empowerment**

Women must be supported in replacing the use of hazardous pesticides with agroecology, which is already being practised by thousands of farmers worldwide to ensure food security, safety and sovereignty, and a pollution-free world.

The FAO supports that agroecology can support women to become more autonomous and empower them from household to national levels. Women’s participation is essential for agroecology and women are frequently the leaders of agroecological approaches.[[18]](#footnote-18) The CFS 2023 Voluntary Guideline GEWGE[[19]](#footnote-19) also acknowledges women’s access to and control over key natural and productive resources as key to food security, shelter, income and livelihoods, and a reference to CEDAW’s recommendation number 34 referring to food sovereignty**.**[[20]](#footnote-20)These provide positive steps that would help transform agriculture and food systems that guarantee gender equality and rights of women to food, health and safe and healthy environment.

For more than four decades, PANAP worked with communities to raise awareness on the toxic impacts of pesticides, and support their transition to agroecology. Between 2021-2023, CPAM results of 3380 respondents in Bangladesh, India, Vietnam and Laos show that higher awareness on hazardous impacts on pesticides exists. In India, women leaders organised themselves into Pesticide Poisoning Monitoring Committees in their communities. In Bangladesh, farmers have committed to stopping the use of pesticides in their home gardens. In Vietnam, women leaders, through their awareness of the dangers of pesticides have been involved in protecting children, leading to a commitment in several schools to create pesticide-free buffer zones. These changes however, need to be strongly supported by governments to ensure that community and CSO efforts are sustained and replicated.

1. **Recommendations**

* The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights has outlined 31 principles implementing the [UN’s “Protect, Respect and Remedy”](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf) framework. These Principles have been useful as a standard for corporate accountability. However, pesticide corporations do not take responsibilities for their product causing poisonings. It is crucial therefore, that binding rules are developed to hold companies accountable and prevent human rights violations before they occur.
* Governments must review and phase out highly hazardous pesticides as these pesticides cannot be used without risk to health and the environment.
* FAO, UNEP and WHO should work with countries to develop and implement the targets on highly hazardous pesticides and their alternatives in the newly adopted [Global Framework on Chemicals](https://www.chemicalsframework.org/about/overview#:~:text=The%20Global%20Framework%20advocates%20for,HHPs)%20in%20agriculture%20by%202035), and to urgently implement the [resolution on Global Alliance on HHPs](https://www.chemicalsframework.org/page/resolution-v11-highly-hazardous-pesticides).
* For UNEP to urgently work towards implementing the actions under the [Resolution on HHPs adopted in UNEA6](https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=UNEP%2FEA.6%2FL.14&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False).
* Governments must stop double standards – the trade of banned pesticides in a country or region exported to another.
* Governments, private sector, financial institutions and the UN must accelerate policy, technical and financial support for agroecology especially guaranteeing women’s ownership and access to land, resources and markets.
* Governments must comply with Article 3.6 of the [International Code of Conduct on Pesticide Management](https://www.fao.org/3/I3604E/i3604e.pdf) and ban pesticides that require PPE.
* Asian governments must sign on to ILO Convention 184 ‘Safety and Health in Agriculture’ that guarantees the rights of workers in agriculture including ensuring that they are given information on safety and health matters, have safety and health representatives, and can remove themselves from harm of agrochemicals without being penalised for their actions.
* Governments must guarantee and strengthen social protection policies and programmes for rural women especially for migrant and informal workers.
* Overall, governments must ratify and implement laws that guarantee women’s rights to a healthy and clean environment, free of toxic pesticides.

1. Boedeker W, Watts M, Clausing P, Marquez E. 2020. The global distribution of acute unintentional pesticide poisoning: estimations based on a systematic review. BMC Public Health 20:1875. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-09939-0>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. IPEN and SAICM. 2020. Women, Chemicals and the SGDs. <https://saicmknowledge.org/sites/default/files/resources/ipen-gender-chemicals-report-v1_6dw-en.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. PANAP. 2018. Of Rights and Poisons: Accountability of the Agrochemical Industry. *This study covered Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines and Vietnam with a total of 2,205 respondents*. <https://panap.net/resource/of-rights-and-poisons-accountability-of-the-agrochemical-industry/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The HHPs include butachlor, paraquat, fipronil, carbofuran, chlorantraniliprole, chlorpyrifos, cypermethrin, glyphosate, lambda-cyhalothrin, imidacloprid, malathion and monocrotophos. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Venugopal, D., Karunamoorthy, P., Beerappa R., et.al. 2021. Evaluation of work place pesticide concentration and health complaints among women workers in tea plantation, Southern India. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41370-020-00284-3> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Watts, M. 2013. Breast Cancer, Pesticides and You. <https://panap.net/resource/breast-cancer-pesticides-and-you/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, Friends of the Earth Europe, Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz, Berlin, Germany

   PAN Europe. 2022. Pesticide Atlas: Facts and figures about toxic chemicals in agriculture. Kenya edition. Article by Ilang Ilang, “Gender at the forefront of exposure”. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Tenaganita. 2023. Malaysia Country Report: Social Protection and Labour Rights of Women in Malaysia’s Plantation Sector. Unpublished report. The focused group discussion involved fifty women farmers and agricultural workers covering four plantation estates and a farm in Selangor and Sabah. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. PANAP. 2023. Irene Fernandez Leadership Training for Rural Women. <https://files.panap.net/resources/Irene-Fernandez-Leadership-Training-for-Rural-Women.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. PAN India, 2017. Untold Realities of Pesticide Poisonings in Yavatmal district in Maharashtra

    PAN India Releases Assessment Report on Yavatmal Poisonings and Deaths. <http://www.pan-india.org/untold-realities-of-pesticide-poisonings-in-yavatmal-district-in-maharashtra/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Public Eye. The Yavatmal Scandal. 2017. <https://toxicexports.publiceye.ch/> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Public Eye et al. vs. Syngenta. 2020. Syngenta pesticide poisons Indian agricultural workers. <https://www.oecdwatch.org/complaint/public-eye-et-al-vs-syngenta/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The National Contact Point (NCP) promotes the observance of the [OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprise on Responsible Business Conduct](https://www.seco.admin.ch/seco/en/home/Aussenwirtschaftspolitik_Wirtschaftliche_Zusammenarbeit/Wirtschaftsbeziehungen/nachhaltigkeit_unternehmen/oecd-guidelines.html) and discusses with parties concerned all relevant issues so as to contribute to the resolution of any problems which might arise. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Public Eye. 2022. Yavatmal pesticide poisonings: Syngenta gets away without providing remedy to Indian farmers. <https://www.publiceye.ch/en/media-corner/press-releases/detail/yavatmal-pesticide-poisonings-syngenta-gets-away-without-providing-remedy-to-indian-farmers> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Tenaganita. 2023. Malaysia Country Report: Social Protection and Labour Rights of Women in Malaysia’s Plantation Sector. Unpublished report. The focused group discussion involved fifty women farmers and agricultural workers covering four plantation estates and a farm in Selangor and Sabah. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. PANAP. 2023. Unboxed: Online Sales of Banned Pesticides in Malaysia. <https://files.panap.net/resources/Unboxed-Online-Sales-of-Banned-Pesticides-in-Malaysia.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. FAO. 2019. The 10 elements of Agroecology: Guiding the transition to sustainable food and agricultural systems. <https://www.fao.org/3/i9037en/i9037en.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. CFS. 2023. [Voluntary Guidelines on Gender Equality and Women’s and Girls’ Empowerment in the Context of Food Security and Nutrition](https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/cfs/Docs2223/Gender/Guidelines_Final_Agreed_Version_June_2023_CLEAN/GEWGE_Guidelines_Final_Agreed_Version_June_2023_CLEAN.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. CEDAW 34 mentions that “States should ensure the realisation of the right to food and nutrition of rural women within the framework of food sovereignty and ensure that they have the authority to manage and control their natural resources.” <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/835897?ln=en&v=pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)