
Malaysia: Women plantations workers' conditions in oil palm plantations

In Malaysia, women plantation workers appear to have been neglected in the Government's plans to eradicate poverty and enhance the status of women. The progress achieved so far in empowering women has been unequal. Women plantation workers still lag behind, since they are unable to free themselves from the vicious cycle of poverty they find themselves in.

The plantation industry is a crucial part of the country's development. Malaysia is a world leader in palm oil and natural rubber production and the cultivation of these crops is a major agricultural activity in the country. Apart from smallholders who depend on these commodities for their livelihood, there are also waged labourers employed by plantation companies. In 2005, an estimated 1,268,500 people were employed in the agriculture and fishery sector, which includes farm workers, plantation workers and forestry workers. Large segments of the population involved in the agriculture and plantation sector are poor.

In recent years, the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) has been working with labourers on oil palm and rubber plantations on the Peninsula. We have been involved in occupational health and safety issues, the fight for better wages, securing basic needs such as housing, health and sanitation, and other social issues such as domestic violence and alcohol abuse. In the area of occupational health and safety, the primary concern has been the use of highly hazardous herbicides such as paraquat, which was only recently banned in Malaysia.

Currently women make up nearly half the workforce on plantations where spraying a variety of herbicides is an integral part of plantation work. The reason why plantation companies employ women as herbicide sprayers is because women are readily available since they are unable to find other jobs. They are also considered timid, docile and compliant workers, as they do not question management and are easy to manipulate.

Most women on the plantations were born and raised there, as were their parents and grandparents. The environment on the plantation is hardly conducive to attaining a decent education or acquiring the critical skills needed in more specialized sectors of the economy. Studies have shown that women in poor rural households attain lower levels of education. This fact added to the prevailing poverty places women on plantations in a very vulnerable position.

Lack of education, age and social exclusion therefore diminish women's opportunities and limit their possibilities for joining mainstream jobs in the industrial and service sector. Since most companies provide housing for their workers, this is a further incentive for women to continue living on the plantation.

In 2004, CAP conducted a study of 11 oil palm plantations located in the northern states of Malaysia. The study focused on women herbicide sprayers, their working conditions and the consequent health impacts. Work on an oil palm plantation is back-breaking and hazardous. Women herbicide sprayers are expected to carry an 18-litre (4-gallon) drum containing herbicide and complete 14 to 16 rounds of spraying per day. Tractor spraying is also conducted on some plantations, where big drums of

herbicide are placed on both sides of the tractor. Two women carry the pumps and spray as the tractor moves.

In either case, the sprayers themselves are engulfed in a fine mist of herbicide. Recommended safety measures are rarely employed. The use of protective masks, gloves and boots is often impractical owing to the hot and humid tropical climate. Due to the widespread lack of awareness of the hazards of herbicides, inhalation and skin absorption are the major causes of occupational poisoning cases among women sprayers.

On the plantations, management decides which pesticides or herbicides to use as well as their frequency of application. The majority of workers interviewed did not even know what herbicides they were using while others identified them only by colour or odour. The women obligingly carried out their supervisors' instructions on proportions and mixing of the herbicides. Most of the women were not even aware of the toxicity of the chemicals and the dangers that they were being exposed to.

The only protection women wear are safety boots and maybe a handkerchief or towel to cover their mouth and nose. The women complain that management is reluctant to replace worn personal protective equipment and demand that workers show them the damaged equipment. Even so, they only replace equipment periodically. Most women must purchase their own safety boots since they cannot get replacement for torn boots from their employers. Others do not replace their boots since they cannot afford to do so.

The women work six days a week on a rotational basis and receive menial wages in return for their work. Earning their full weekly wage usually involves working long hours in the blazing sun. Furthermore, fear of losing their job makes them put up with unpleasant conditions including offensive remarks and undue pressure, while at times being subject to sexual harassment.

Workers are paid between MYR 15 to MYR 18 (USD 3.95 to USD 4.75) per day. Each herbicide sprayer earns MYR 350 to 450 (USD 92 to 118) per month. Some plantation companies give an extra MYR 2 (about USD 0.50) per day to herbicide sprayers. This is a clear indication that danger lurks in herbicide spraying compared to other work. On some plantations, electricity and water bills are deducted from salaries.

The survey results found that women sprayers are often not in good health. They suffer from acute and chronic ailments related to their work. Most plantations provide medical facilities for their workers although most of the time these facilities are inadequate and ineffective. If the women suffer from major illnesses that the plantation paramedic cannot treat, they must visit a medical doctor in the nearest town. Ill health affects productivity directly, so many illnesses go unreported.

Another disturbing revelation is that, as they are not provided with protective equipment, workers who are employed on a contractual basis work in worse conditions and are expected to manipulate more potent and harmful herbicides, and do not have medical coverage.

Why do the women remain on the plantations despite the poverty they experience and exposure to poisons? During the 1980's many plantations replaced rubber trees with oil palms due to higher economic returns. Therefore women plantation workers who were previously skilled rubber tappers lost their source of livelihood. Some of the women had tapped rubber all of their working-life and were therefore left in a difficult employment situation. In order not to be evicted from the plantation, the women had no choice but accept any job offered by management. Hence the women became herbicide sprayers even though it was not their choice of work.

As palm oil commodity prices increase in coming years, we can expect Malaysian production also to increase since it is one of the country's major crops. This will further intensify women's involvement in the sector. Women will find it increasingly difficult to escape this vicious cycle of poverty and their increasingly poor health will be the price they pay.

It is difficult to break out of a poverty situation and education is one of the means by which families on plantations can escape poverty. For this reason, there is a need for policy and programme interventions to assist and encourage the children of plantation workers to pursue their education.

Excerpts from: Plantation workers face poverty and poison, by Mageswari Sangaralingam, Consumers' Association of Penang, <http://www.socialwatch.org/en/informesNacionales/437.html>