
Malaysia: The plight of women workers in oil palm plantations

Women are more than half --around 30.000-- of the workforce in Malaysian plantations, and have been historically employed as unskilled, temporary contract workers doing the most menial and underpaid jobs. Urbanisation and industrialisation has pushed men and the young to work in the new industrial zones while women stay on and continue to take on any job so that they can have a house and basic amenities provided by the plantation company, which are otherwise beyond their reach. Thus, women have played the dual role of providing cheap labour and social stability.

In the early sixties, when synthetic rubber consumption controlled by industrialised countries rose to more than 60 per cent globally, rubber prices dropped sharply. Malaysia rubber plantations could not compete so the plantation sector was under pressure to diversify and introduced oil palm as the alternative crop. The country later became the world's top producer and exporter of palm oil, in a push which has encountered --and still is encountering-- strong opposition from indigenous peoples like those of Sarawak, who defend their traditional lands and forests from the devastating monoculture schemes that allow the country to insert in the global economy but at the cost of depriving the people from their livelihood.

The oil palm crops required more intensive 'care' from pests and the use of pesticides became a major requirement. Women were recruited as sprayers of pesticides and fertilisers -30,000 women are estimated to be working as such in the country, most of them Indian. The organisation Tenaganita --or Women's Force-- has been working with plantation workers since 1991. The compiled information about the work and life of plantation workers and the case studies of their exploitation as women and as workers has allowed the organisation to voice the plight of those women "poisoned and silenced", in a report produced together with Pesticide Action Network (PAN) Asia and the Pacific (the full report is available at http://www.evb.ch/index.cfm?page_id=1300).

The study reveals poor maintenance and leaks in the sprays, poor medical care and first aid facilities on the estate, and in some cases lack of protective equipment. Especially for women, the absence of medical monitoring and a total lack of understanding of how they are affected by these chemicals, make it difficult to assess the extent of the impact of pesticides and chemicals on them, on their reproductive health and on their unborn children. But the impacts are very real.

The skin is the body's largest organ; 90 per cent of exposure to pesticides occurs through the skin, and women have a thin skin which predisposes them to a high level of absorption of chemicals into the body. Very few women know that the highest absorption point is the genital area. They experience severe vaginal burning sensations after spraying but suffer in silence since they are ashamed to state this problem to the hospital assistants that usually are men, so the problem goes unchecked. The common symptoms of fatigue, back pain, very bad headaches, nausea, giddiness, tightness of the chest, chest pains, swelling breasts, are indicative of exposure to organophosphate and carbamate type of pesticides.

Pointing at the accountable players, the report underlines that the owners and the management of the plantations make the decisions on the tasks, the method of spraying, the type of pesticides used,

the health care services and the actions taken when a complaint is lodged. The plantation industry has failed to set up safety committees and adhere to the Occupational and Safety Act. And worse, it has not given the workers appropriate information on the poisons they would have to handle and use. Though it is aware of the dangers that these poisons pose, it still continues to use very highly toxic pesticides. However, it has developed strategies so that it will not be made accountable. The industry has structured the task of spraying into the 'sub-contractual work' category. As such, the workers come directly under the supervision of the sub contractor. Many remain as temporary workers, and in this way the industry has abdicated its responsibility. Its concern is only profits and not the lives of the workers who bring in the wealth to the industry.

As for the pesticide industry, though it works closely with the plantation industry without coming directly in contact with the workers, it is responsible to ensure that the pesticides it manufactures and distributes do not poison workers, the public and the environment. However, the industry has not, or has been very slow, in taking action to address these issues, and has often been more vocal in denying that poisoning has taken place.

The Pesticide Board and the Department of Occupational Safety and Health are responsible to ensure protection and safety of the workers from poisons. Overall, there is a lack of monitoring of the sale, use and impact of the poisons in the plantations. The weak implementation of the regulations in the plantation sector has led to women workers being poisoned daily. Besides this, health or medical personnel have not been trained effectively to deal with pesticide poisoning and health. Thus the government is equally accountable for the current health crisis of plantation women sprayers.

The National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW) though comprised by 60% of women, has failed to address the frightening reality of women workers and their daily exposure to poisons. The leadership has bargained for slightly higher wages for sprayers as a 'high-risk' job. The lack of gender perspective is reflected in the absence of programs for women and lack of women leaders in the Union itself.

The hiring of migrant workers, most of them employed as contract labour, is an emerging issue. Activities are often sub-contracted to businesses or agents who supply these contract workers to undertake various jobs on the plantation without becoming employees. They are unprotected by all the labour regulations, are highly mobile and face the high risk of being arrested, detained and deported. Thus these workers are also highly vulnerable and face acute risks to their health with no access to medical care or treatment.

Eventually, the reduction or prevention of toxicity related to pesticide usage in the country would entail, among other actions, that the use of hazardous compounds such as pesticides is banned and/or severely restricted, alternatives to chemical pest control are promoted in the country, and the gender perspective is integrated in the analysis of the occupational hazards of pesticides.

A women organisation has spoken loud. It has given voice to the "silenced" in an effort to counterbalance the harmful effects of a failed production pattern of large scale monoculture plantations which is artificial, insecure, and reinforces women exclusion with no benefit for the people at large.

Article based on: "Poisoned and Silenced. A Study of Pesticide Poisoning in the Plantations", Tenaganita, e-mail: tenaganita@yahoo.co.uk or tnita@hotmail.com , http://caramasia.gn.apc.org/tn_page0.html ; and Pesticide Action Network (PAN) Asia and the Pacific, e-mail: panap@panap.net, <http://www.panap.net/>

