# Women Plantation Workers Poisoned and Silenced

In 2002, the Malaysian organization Tenaganita, together with Pesticide Action Network-Asia Pacific launched a study that confirmed that women plantation workers were being poisoned by the use of highly toxic pesticides, especially paraquat.

At the launching of the "Study of Pesticides Poisoning in the Plantations", Tenaganita Director, Dr. Irene Fernandez said that “If the Malaysian government had, through its enforcement agencies the Department of Occupational Safety and Health and the Pesticides Board, effectively implemented the laws the women would not have suffered."

What the Malaysian state actually did do in October 2003 was to imprison Irene Fernandez in relation with a previous study carried out by her organization: "Abuse , Torture and Dehumanized Treatment of Migrant Workers in Detention Centres". Accused of "maliciously publishing false news", she is still in prison serving a 12 month sentence (see article below).

When she is eventually released, will she be again accused of "maliciously publishing false news" in relation with the more recent study on the condition of women plantation workers which are "poisoned and silenced" by the oil palm industry? The possibility is very real, given the powerful economic interests involved in the Malaysian oil palm sector.

However, the study's findings can in no way be considered as "false", and they are totally consistent with the information on working conditions in oil palm plantation in both Malaysia and elsewhere. The peculiarity in this case is the strong presence of women affected by standard operations of these companies regarding pesticide use.

The study proves that women sprayers working in plantations in Malaysia are poisoned by the pesticides they spray daily. It also reaffirms that the living conditions in plantations are poor, medical care is inadequate and that estate management is oblivious and often unsympathetic towards the social and health problems faced by workers.

The common symptoms noted among women plantation workers were fatigue, vomiting, back pain, giddiness, difficulty in breathing, skin problems, nausea, eye irritation, headache, tight feeling in the chest, and swelling, which are indicative of exposure to organophosphate and carbamate type of pesticides. Blood samples revealed a depression in the acetyl cholinesterase enzyme activity, which is confirmation of pesticide poisoning. The study also confirmed that the sample population was spraying organophosphate-type pesticides, indicated by a lowering of the acetyl cholinesterase levels in plasma and blood. After a one-month break in spraying, enzyme levels of selected sprayers were elevated, reconfirming that they were poisoned by organophosphate when the readings were taken a month earlier.

The study confirmed that a major pesticide used in the plantations is Paraquat (a herbicide). Poisoning due to Paraquat is clearly demonstrated in the surveys and interviews with workers, and indicated in the medical examinations. The women suffered nose bleeds, tearing of the eyes, contact

dermatitis, skin irritation and sores, nail discolouration, dropping of the nails, swelling of the joints, and abdominal ulcerations. This in spite of the fact that Malaysia has classified paraquat as Class I (extremely hazardous) pesticide. To make matters worse, the study noted that the area planted to oil palm is expected to rise from 2.7 million ha (1998) to 4.3 million ha in 2020, with a subsequent rise in the use of agrochemicals. Paraquat use is expected to rise from 5 million litres (2000) to 7.4 million litres in 2020.

The study found that women working in the plantations could not read the labels in English and Malay, and could not read labels on the pesticide containers if these were present. In the majority of cases labels are removed. It was commonly seen that pesticides were used in concentrations in excess of requirements; in ‘cocktails’ whose ingredients were not known; and often the estate management chose not to divulge the names of pesticides used, to the sprayers.

Additionally, the spraying equipment was sometimes leaking, and posed additional dangers of spillage and toxicity to the sprayers. Further, the equipment was stored in workers homes, adding risk to the whole family.

The study also found that estate management did not provide training on safety precautions and procedures to be followed while handling pesticides. There were no training materials available in local languages for workers and medical professionals. The protective gear provided, if any, was inappropriate to the local hot and humid conditions and is thus not used by most sprayers. These factors aggravated the risk factor for working in plantations.

To make matters worse, the study noted that medical professionals were not adequately trained to recognize symptoms of pesticide exposure and often disregarded these as minor complaints of cough, headaches etc. This further underestimated the real picture regarding poisoning attributable to pesticide exposure. There was an alarming lack of sensitivity among medical staff, paramedics and Hospital Assistants, which compounded their inability to deal with the women’s problems. Since the majority of the medical staff were male, the women were unable to express and share their condition and ailments.

Will all the above be considered as "maliciously publishing false news"? Shouldn't the Malaysian government and its enforcement agencies -the Department of Occupational Safety and Health and the Pesticides Board- be instead accused of "maliciously silencing true allegations"?

Article based on information from: "Women Plantation Workers Poisoned and Silenced"., Tenaganita/PAN-Asia Pacific, 2002,
http://www.panap.net/highlightsA1.cfm?id=9&hiliteid=HILITE04#Top
"A Study of Pesticide Poisoning in the Plantations", Tenaganita/PAN-Asia Pacific, 2002,
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