

Gender Heroes: from grassroots to global action

A COLLECTION OF STORIES FEATURING
GENDER PERSPECTIVES ON THE MANAGEMENT
OF HAZARDOUS CHEMICALS AND WASTES



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations



BASEL CONVENTION



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STOCKHOLM CONVENTION

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FOREWORD

It is an inspiration and a delight to bring you such a varied collection of stories from around the world that provide a snapshot of how gender perspectives are being incorporated into the sound management of chemicals and wastes. Bringing gender issues to the forefront of the chemicals and waste agenda is absolutely key as women, men, boys and girls are exposed to these harmful substances in different ways and to varying degrees depending on where they work and live. In addition to gender differences in exposure to hazardous substances there are also differences in physiological susceptibility between men and women, girls and boys. We need to take these differences into account when we devise measures for the sound management of chemicals and wastes so that we tailor our responses with gender aspects in mind.

The stories featured in this publication bring forth a picture of grassroots action being taken around the world every day by individuals and communities to protect the most vulnerable segments of our population from the potentially harmful effects of certain chemicals and wastes. Many of the stories speak of the empowerment of women in marginalised communities and the impacts that their actions have had in the promotion of ecological agriculture and the reduction of use of highly hazardous pesticides, in the protection of children from the toxics found in toys and in the collection of e-waste from landfill sites, to name but a few examples. Several stories break down gender stereotypes and show women as pioneers in areas that have traditionally been thought of as a man's domain, such as in scientific research, the shipping industry, even sailing. Whilst approaching the issue from differing perspectives, it is clear that all of the proponents in these stories are playing an invaluable role in not only bringing gender issues to the fore, but also in raising awareness and promoting action to ensure the sound management of chemicals and wastes.

I hope you enjoy reading the publication as much as we have enjoyed creating it.

Kerstin Stendahl
Deputy Executive Secretary
Secretariat of the Basel, Rotterdam
and Stockholm Conventions



INTRODUCTION

The adverse effects of hazardous chemicals and wastes on different groups of the population vary depending on the level of exposure, behavioural patterns, age, biological effect (for example, endocrine disruption), geographical location, nutritional status and co-exposure to other chemicals. Certain types of chemicals, such as persistent organic pollutants (POPs), can build up to dangerous levels in humans and wildlife causing adverse reproductive, developmental, immunological, hormonal, and carcinogenic effects with varied impacts on vulnerable groups of the population.

Low-income pregnant women and children in developing countries are particularly vulnerable to toxics and their exposure to certain chemicals can compromise the ability of children to escape poverty through education and work.¹ Women comprise 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force, while some 60 per cent of child labourers aged 5 to 17 years work in agriculture often in informal, low-paid or unremunerated jobs and under poor working conditions.² Pesticides are among the most severe hazards children and adults are exposed to in agriculture.³

Children are particularly susceptible to the negative health impacts of chemicals due to their rapid growth and development and greater exposure relative to body weight. They are exposed to chemicals in the womb, during their most sensitive developmental phase, and later born into a world polluted by chemicals. For example, methyl mercury exposure in utero and early in life can result in mental retardation (IQ loss), seizures, vision and hearing loss, delayed development, language disorders and memory loss. Breastfeeding can transfer further toxic chemicals from mother to child. Prenatal and early childhood exposure to lead, for instance, can result in demonstrable decreased

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