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ISLAND project - Webinar

Presentation: Why gender matters in chemicals (and waste)

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Thank you very much for the kind introduction and for the invitation. It is a great honour for me to speak to you today!

I have been invited to talk about why gender matters with regard to chemicals and waste. The MSP Institute is mainly involved in advocacy work on gender equality at the international policy level, especially in the SAICM process – the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management, hosted at UNEP. That is why my presentation has a global perspective and a focus on chemicals (not so much on waste), and I am very excited to hear more from the Stockholm Convention and your perspectives and experiences from your region later.

To present the interlinkages of gender and chemicals I will first introduce you to the gender dimensions in chemicals management, and afterwards I will speak about the current status of the integration of gender in the policy field of chemicals and pollution, its challenges and what I believe is needed for a gender-just sustainable chemistry for the future.

Chemicals are everywhere, in every object and in every part of our daily lives, and at the same time gender inequalities are omnipresent in our societies. This is one reason why gender aspects can be found in numerous chemical-related sectors and areas of life. Often these gender aspects are multi-dimensional and complex and not easy to grasp.

In our advocacy work, we need to communicate these connections between gender and chemicals in an easy-to-understand way to decision makers. We usually distinguish **three key gender dimensions**:

the biological aspects,

the social aspects and

the transformative potential of the gender perspective,

and I briefly want to introduce them now:

Firstly, the **biological dimension**:

The bodies of women and men are often affected differently by chemicals:

Reasons for these biological differences in exposure include differences in body composition and hormone levels.

In addition, women in particular go through different phases of life than men, such as pregnancy, breast feeding and menopause, during which their bodies are more susceptible to health damage from chemicals.

Overall, however, most of these biological differences have not been researched sufficiently, which contributes to inadequate protection against chemical exposure.

Furthermore, chemical exposure can also be passed on to the next generation, which makes this an issue of intergenerational environmental justice. This chemical exposure usually occurs in particular women's bodies through the placenta and during breastfeeding, which is why women of childbearing age need special protection.

But poor sperm quality at fertilization can also harm the child. New data shows that sperm counts have declined by more than 62 percent worldwide, and modern chemicals might be one reason for this. However, and unfortunately, the issue of male's reproductive health is still a taboo in our societies, and so there is not much information and awareness-raising.

One example for these biological aspects is the chemical Bisphenol A (BPA) that has been linked to increased rates of infertility and estrogen production. BPA is still found in multiple plastics and plastic waste and affects pregnant women, fetuses, and newborns the most. Another example are per and polyfluorinated alkyl substances (PFAS), which are often used in food packaging to make them water and grease resistant. Most of the health effects of PFAS are gender-specific and harmful to women and men, - and some of them also have effects on the next generation, including reduced responses to vaccines).

In addition to these biological factors, chemical exposure is also influenced by the second gender dimension: **the social gender aspects.**

Women and men are often affected differently by chemicals because of their gendered roles in society.

Especially due to the division of labour - men are for example more likely to work in construction and thus come into contact with chemicals from building materials, while women are more likely to work in the care sector, with cleaning or care products.

Additionally, the division of labour causes differences in exposure within individual sectors: for example, men are often more directly exposed because they more often perform risky tasks, whereas women's occupational diseases are often under-diagnosed, under-reported and under-compensated because their exposition is more indirect and goes on over a long period of time. Pesticide use is a good example for that: men are often the ones who mix the pesticides, and accidents can lead to acute poisoning, while women are often responsible for harvesting the crops or doing the laundry and are thus indirectly exposed to the pesticides.

In addition, women often do not benefit equally from the chemical and waste sectors, even though they put themselves at risk of exposure. For example, according to the World Economic Forum in 2021, 80% of CEOs and business owners in the plastics value chain in Ghana were men, while 68% of the workforce of recycling companies were women.

Women are also more affected by indoor pollution than men because they more often do care work at home. Here, they are exposed to chemicals in furniture, which is especially the case in poor population groups.

And finally, due to gender roles, women and men show differences in their consumer behaviour and tend to use different products. Women, for example, tend to buy many more cosmetic products than men, and these products often contain potentially harmful chemicals.

But all of these social gender aspects receive no or clearly too little attention in chemical research, safety trainings and risk assessments.

Due to these two dimensions, we believe that the inclusion of the gender perspective offers a great **potential for the transformation** of our societies – and this is the third gender dimension.

The gender perspective allows us to understand the causes of unsustainable behaviour in dealing with chemicals and helps us find new solutions for a more effective and sustainable chemicals management.

For example, by using a gender perspective, we can better understand why women and men often fail to take adequate protective measures when dealing with toxic chemicals.

Women are less likely to be able to afford appropriately-fitting personal protective equipment than their male colleagues, because it is often more expensive or not even available on the market. The design is often based on Western male body measurements, which is usually too big for women and therefore does not fit and protect properly.

Men, on the other hand, have grown up in many cultures with a certain role model of male strength and invulnerability, which makes them believe that wearing protective clothing is unnecessary and would make them look weak - this is a gender image that is very damaging to men worldwide and becoming aware of this with the gender perspective can certainly be very helpful in chemical safety trainings.

Another example for using the gender perspective is a project we have done with partners in Ethiopia, where we have analysed what needs to be considered from a gender perspective when introducing mercury-free technologies in small scale gold mining. The results highlighted that success depends on promoting women's empowerment with the formalization of women miners, gender-sensitive information campaigns and technology trainings for women miners, and by strengthening women's access to finance.

To sum up, we have heard that gender dimensions affect the management of chemicals, that gender inequalities can lead to an unsustainable and unhealthy handling of chemicals and that the gender perspective can offer new solutions for better chemicals management.

How is this reflected in chemicals management so far?

When we look at chemicals policies, programmes, projects and activities – we see that the issue of gender and chemicals is often not fully addressed, even though there are of course important policy instruments like the gender action plan of the BRS conventions.

What are the **challenges**?

In conversation with decision makers and the industry, we experience that there is still a huge lack of awareness, on gender itself and also on its interlinkages with chemicals.

One of the main reasons for this knowledge gap is the massive **lack of gender data and research**. As UNEP's SAICM Secretariat stated in a policy brief: *“Overall, there is limited data or hard numbers on how different gender roles differentially expose men and women to hazardous chemicals.”* (SAICM, 2017)

And in the Gender and Environmental Outlook UNEP warns in 2016 that *“In the absence of [gender] data, environmental analyses remain inadequate and partial, and establishing baselines, monitoring progress and assessing outcomes is almost impossible.”*

This lack of gender data and research also means that very few methods, strategies or tools have been developed so far to help actors in the chemical sector to integrate gender mainstreaming into their work. Strategic gender mainstreaming in chemicals management is rare – simply because the actors don't know how to do it.

This was underlined in an online discussion of the *SAICM Community of Practice on Chemicals and SDGs* in September 2020 when participants addressed the implementation of gender mainstreaming into national policies:

- There (eighty-seven – five percent) 87,5% of the participants thought that gender inequalities related to the management of chemicals and waste do exist in their countries.
- But in more than 50% of the countries, gender mainstreaming is not considered in environmental and health policies yet, and no gender experts or women's organizations are involved in chemicals management at the national level.

And in the few cases where gender is attempted to be integrated, there is often a strong **focus on the vulnerability of women**.

For example, when women are mentioned in the national implementation plans of the BRS conventions from 2017, in 41% of the cases they were described as vulnerable, in 33% as beneficiaries and in 35% as stakeholders - but only in 2 % of the national implementation plans women were mentioned as agents of change in chemicals management.

However, unless women are empowered and we address gender equality through structural change, we will not achieve the SDGs, including SDG 5 in gender equality. And without gender equality, chemistry simply will not become sustainable.

What we need is **gender-just sustainable chemistry** – and in my view this must mean that:

- 1.) no gender suffers from toxic chemicals and structural inequalities in chemistry,
- 2.) all genders are seen as agents of change and are empowered to take leadership roles, and
- 3.) all genders benefit equally from sustainable chemistry.

That is why the Community of Practice on Gender Equality + Chemicals and Waste is very much needed - we need platforms for learning exchange between stakeholders and I am pretty sure that your experiences will be also very helpful for decision-makers from other world regions. Furthermore, we urgently need projects and implementation activities that recognize women's leadership and their experiences, their perspective and their expertise as keys for effective chemicals and waste management.

Finally, I want to say that I am also very thankful to meet Ruth in this webinar again and to learn more about your work, Ruth. We successfully advocated together with the women and gender group in the SAICM intersessional process this September in Bucharest and we could include several text proposals on women and gender in the negotiation document.

And next year, this advocacy work will be even more important: hopefully the new framework for the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management will be adopted (with a gender action plan) at the ICCM5 conference

in addition, the discussions on the new Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution will begin, and there are of course also the discussions on the new plastic treaty.

In these processes, the voices of women leaders in chemicals management are often still missing and the relevance of gender equality is not fully recognized – **and I very much hope that we will change that together.**

Thank you so much for having me - I am very much looking forward to answer any questions and to hear about your projects, experiences and ideas. Thank you!

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