

Statement of Women's Group

Many chemicals we once welcomed into our households, farms and factories are now threatening health, the environment, sustainable development and the planet safety. Chemicals developed by man, some well known toxic and some not even very well known, as well as persistent heavy metals are found in our bodies when we are born, in animals and in water, air and food.

Women are very active in the Chemicals issue, since they understand the importance to protect children's health and allow them to fully develop their capacities. Brain's development is affected by neurotoxic chemicals, some other chemicals interfere with the normal hormonal function (better known as endocrine disruptors) causing diabetes and thyroid problems or affecting reproduction, other are well known geno-toxic, carcinogenic, or are responsible of other diseases with a high cost to Public Health, for production and sustainable development, without mentioning the pain and economic cost that these diseases cause to families and communities.

Was Mrs. Gro Bruntland who said that Children's health is at the heart of sustainable development.

As Mrs. Bruntland did, women often play a leading role in advocacy and by calling the attention to very important issues that affects communities and vulnerable groups compromising health and quality of life. More gender mainstreaming is important to go on with this work in all policy levels as well.

Many obstacles & constraints to implementation are present. We only would like to name a few, since we have only a few minutes. The most important thing is to start acting. We already know many problems and we know ways to solve it, but it lacks the political will and funding – for developing countries and countries in transition, and for civil society to implement solutions.

Adequate information on toxic chemicals is still not available

Chapter 19 of Agenda 21 emphasizes that: "The broadest possible awareness of chemical risks is a prerequisite for achieving chemical safety." However, nearly two decades later, very little information exists on approximately 80,000 – 100,000 chemicals currently in use.

Toxic chemicals in products threaten human health

Harmful chemicals in products have become a global problem through international trade. Examples include children's toys, textiles and clothing, furnishings and carpets, jewellery, electronics, furniture, and cleaning supplies. Vulnerable groups, such as children and pregnant women, are at particular risks from exposure to a variety of substances contained in these products

Key principles for chemicals regulatory policy are not widely implemented

Broad incorporation of the four core principles of chemical regulatory policy – no date – no market, the right to know, substitution, and precautionary principle - has not occurred.

Highly hazardous pesticides and their obsolete stockpiles, especially in many developing and transition countries still harm human health and the environment

Developing and transition countries need financial and technical resources for sound chemicals management

Available funds are not sufficient for sound chemicals management in developing and transition countries. Many countries have substantial legacy issues, such as obsolete pesticide stockpiles and contaminated sites. A large number of countries require long-term development of infrastructure and capacity. New and additional funds need to be long-term and sustainable to have a lasting impact. New approaches for information and education are needed.

Rotterdam Convention is blocked due to consensus vote and a few countries rejecting constantly the recommendations of the Scientific Review Committee.

Children's health

Children are more at risk to chemical exposure than adults, because they have higher respiration and metabolic rates, they eat and drink more per bodyweight, and they live closer to the ground (crawling, digging in dirt and putting objects in their mouths). Children younger than four years old have the highest levels of persistent organic pollutants (POPs) in their blood, such as brominated flame retardants (Penta BDE and Octa BDE). Research has demonstrated that babies born in developed countries have many synthetic chemicals in umbilical cord blood and meconium at the time of their birth. WHO, UNICEF, and UNEP have identified a growing number of health effects on children due to exposure to hazardous chemicals, these include asthma, birth defects, hypospadias, behavioural disorders, learning disabilities, autism, cancer, dysfunctional immune systems, neurological impairments, endocrine and reproductive disorders. Despite this, most chemicals used have not been adequately tested for their harm to children's health, including the combined impact of different chemicals.

Chemical Safety and Sustainable Development

Until now, source of financial and technical assistance in support of chemical safety objectives has been very limited and difficult to secure. International development assistance agencies and governments have tended to view chemical safety as a luxury that poor countries cannot afford. The adoption of the Strategic Approach, while it does not solve this problem, provides a basis for its solution. The first substantive sentence in the SAICM Dubai Declaration states:

"The sound management of chemicals is essential if we are to achieve sustainable development, including the eradication of poverty and disease, the improvement of human health and the environment and the elevation and maintenance of the standard of living in countries at all levels of development."

In adopting SAICM, governments agreed that advancing chemical safety should be viewed as a necessary component of the sustainable development agenda.