



# Statement to the Commission on the Status of Women (57th session)

Submitted by Women in Europe for a Common Future, WECF (November 2012)

The priority theme for the session in 2013 will be "The elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls".

Paragraph 26 of the report of the Expert Group Meeting on Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls of September 2012 noted

**"... the evidence that violence against women and girls is intensified and exacerbated in situations of socio-economic stress, conflict and other crisis situations. In addition to the impact of economic crises described above, global warming and associated rising sea levels and severe weather events, as well as environmental degradation and resource depletion, can all contribute to conditions of social and economic vulnerability, including homelessness and mass migrations. They can also lead to the disaster or crisis situations in which violence against women and girls is known to increase."**

The argument of violence against women and girls being exacerbated and intensified by inequitable and unsustainable economic activities is commonly known, however, WECF wants to highlight the fact that environmental degradation itself can amount to violence against women and girls as it can have extreme impacts on their living conditions, destroy the basis of their livelihoods, and lead to irreversible damage to their health. The following examples are of concern:

## 1. Mining:

Mining and most other extractive industry activities destroy livelihoods and the environment. In particular, uranium mining has brought great injustice to indigenous peoples on whose territories the uranium is mostly mined, whose lands have become for always uninhabitable because of the long term radioactive pollution. Asbestos mining brings deadly diseases to not only workers, but their entire families. Uranium, mercury, gold and copper mining have polluted drinking water with radioactive and toxic pollutants, irreversibly destroyed forest and pastures, leading to devastating effects on people's livelihoods and health. In most communities which suffer negative effects from mining, women carry the burden of looking after the family members and children ill or born with birth defects due to the mining activities. Another well-researched phenomena of mining activities is that, where mines

open, prostitution appears. There are a great number of cases of violence including death of women which oppose the negative effects of extractive industries, see a.o. the campaign of women's rights defenders in South-America "*Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Mujeres Defensoras de Derechos Humanos*" by La Colectiva Feminista, Consorcio Oaxaca, JASS, AWID, UDEFEGUA, FCAM.

## WECF therefore calls upon governments to:

develop a UN framework for sustainable mining which include high standards as well as an international compliance tribunal/mechanism that require mining companies to take full responsibility for environmental liabilities (including the waste) and health of workers and the neighbouring communities both during and after mining activities, including specific gender sensitive measures. Existing contracts of mining companies with countries which are based on abusive practices, should become invalid. Extractive industry taxes of at least 50% should be set as a norm for already operating mining activities, and new mining investments, of which a share should go into a global fund for clean-up of destruction from already abandoned and closed mining sites and redress-payments for the effected women and their communities.

## 2. Chemicals:

Women's health is differently affected by harmful chemicals, for example specific hormone-disrupting chemicals are related to increased breast cancer risk, and exposure to asbestos to increased risk of ovary cancer. Harmful chemicals and nano-materials not only expose women, but also transfer these chemicals unnoticed to the developing child in case of pregnancy or breastfeeding.

We call upon governments to apply the precautionary principle in chemical policies, when there is uncertainty about possible harm, ensuring that women and children are protected, by reversing the burden of proof and applying the "no data, no market", the "right to know" and the "polluter pays" principles.

It is unacceptable that the worst pesticides which have long been forbidden for use in North America and Europe continue to be exported to countries in the South, where often women are employed as pesticide sprayers, see the campaigns by International Indian Treaty Council and the Pesticide Action Network (<http://>

## WECF Statement

[www.globalfundforwomen.org/impact/success-stories/62/1149-pesticide-action-network-asia-pacific-malaysia](http://www.globalfundforwomen.org/impact/success-stories/62/1149-pesticide-action-network-asia-pacific-malaysia)).

The UNEP Global Chemicals Outlook presented in September 2012 estimated that 900,000 people die annually from immediate results of exposure to the harmful pesticides and chemicals, and 2 million people fall ill, each year.

### **WECF calls upon governments for:**

A. Banning the worst pesticides globally, and immediate support for women victims of exposure to hazardous chemicals financed from a global tax of 0.1% on the turnover of the global chemical industry.

B. Global Application of the precautionary principle in chemicals policy, by safely substituting and phasing out substances of very high concern which should no longer be allowed for widespread use in consumer products or as pesticides until their safety has been proven and global guidelines and regulations established. This applies particularly to substances suspected to be:

- hormone disrupting;
- reprotoxic, mutagenic, carcinogenic;
- bio-accumulative and persistent;
- very bio-accumulative and very persistent;
- neurotoxic or allergenic

C. Awareness raising and support for women in the global south on the link between exposure to harmful chemicals and negative health effects on women, means of reducing exposure, information about their labour rights to be protected from such chemicals, and juridical support to protect and claim their rights.

### **3. Climate change**

Natural disasters, such as floods, can destroy established water systems. In particular for communities relying on unimproved water and sanitation sources this leads to water contamination which often results in the spread of water-related illnesses, such as diarrheal illnesses. Also water scarcity can cause severe illnesses apart from malnutrition. This puts women's health at risk, in particular the one of pregnant women and girls, and puts more stress on women as care takers of their family since the lack of water has an effect on the ability to secure livelihoods, including food security. For women, in particular rural women, being more dependent on natural resources, these effects are more detrimental. These effects impact particularly on the growing number of female-headed households. Unequal access to resources and to decision-making processes can even magnify these adverse effects.

### **WECF therefore calls upon governments to:**

- Work towards a fair climate agreement at UN level which incorporates gender concerns;
- Improve the understanding of gender and climate change and raise awareness of these issues;
- Empower women economically, building their capacity for income generation in the area of renewable energy supply and climate resilience activities (agriculture, wetlands etc.);
- Promote the rights of women to access to resources, land and services;
- Implement the right to access to information, public-participation in decision-making processes and access to justice for women;
- Guarantee girls' and women's rights to climate change education and training.



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