



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

Submitted by Women in Europe for a Common Future, WECF (February 2013)

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 phenomenon 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 for:

I. Guaranteeing free and prior informed consent, the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities and independent assessments of the social, economic and environmental impacts, before extractive industries activities are approved.

II. Development of a UN framework for sustainable mining which includes high standards as well as an international compliance tribunal/mechanism that requires 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.

III. Introduction of extractive industry taxes of at least 50% 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 affected women and their communities.

2. Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

(referred to as WASH):

Women and girls have a greater burden from non-existing and bad water and sanitation (WASH) facilities than men. WHO statistics show that young children and immune-weak people are at greatest risk from becoming ill from WASH related causes; such as diarrhoea, helminth infections. Due to gender-roles women are mostly the main caretakers of sick family members and the increase of WASH-related disease also increases women's workload. Lack of safe menstrual hygiene conditions, due to poor sanitation facilities, insufficient privacy and lack of provision of hygiene materials increase women's illnesses, such as urinary tract infections, dermatitis, abdominal pains, vaginal scabies and complications during pregnancy. In the absence of sanitary facilities or due to cultural reasons, women in many countries have to defecate and urinate in the open or have to wait until dark to go to the toilet or the bush. This not only increases diseases, but also the risk of sexual violence. Also in public sanitation facilities in urban areas women and girls often confront harassment and security risks. Without safe sanitation, women's dignity, safety and health are at stake. This also applies to access to drinking water: women and girls are in the majority responsible for collecting water when there is no tap in-house (see UN GA A/67/270, 2012, paras. 27, 32, 67). Long distances to remote water resources increase women's risk of harassment and violence.

WECF calls upon governments for:

I. National policy aiming at zero-WASH-related gender-violence as part of national water and sanitation policies and plans.

II. Prioritising WASH in national action plans and implementing laws and conventions related to the human right to water and sanitation with respect to all 10 criteria set by the Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation (see *Compilation of Good Practices, UN GA A/HRC/18/33/Add.1, June 2011, para.2*).

III. Providing safe water and sanitation services for the whole population – urban and rural areas, with a focus on the most needy, women, girls, elderly, handicapped, ill.

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- IV. Setting an enabling environment without taboos (provision of hygienic material, awareness raising, education) so that women and girls can manage their menstruation in a safe and hygienic manner.
- V. National policy to achieve gender parity in WASH management institutions and decision making.
- VI. Gender mainstreaming policies and instruments in water resource management which are regularly monitored, evaluated and reported.
- VII. Establishment and integration of women's perspectives in their work on the ground.

3. 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.

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 (*see <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:

- I. 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.
- II. 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
- III. Protection of women and girls by reversing the "burden of proof", applying the "no data, no market", the "right to know" and the "polluter pays" principles.
- IV. 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.

4. Climate change

Natural disasters, such as floods, can create crisis situations in which violence against women and girls increase. They also can destroy established water systems. In particular for communities relying on un-improved water sources and sanitation facilities this leads to water contamination, which often results in the spread of water-related illnesses, such as diarrhoeal illnesses (see point 2). 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 caretakers 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 calls upon governments for:

- I. Cooperation towards a fair, equitable, climate agreement at UN level which incorporates gender concerns.
- II. Improving the understanding of gender and climate change and raise awareness of these issues.
- III. Empowering women economically, building their capacity for income generation in the area of renewable energy supply and climate resilience activities (agriculture, wetlands etc.).
- IV. Ensuring the rights of women to access to resources, land and services.
- V. implementing the right to access to information, public-participation in decision-making processes and access to justice for women.
- VI. Guaranteeing girls' and women's rights to climate change education and training.

About WECF International

Women International for a Common Future is the international division of WECF. WECF international is a network of more than 150 organisations working for a healthy environment and gender equality.

WECF International co-chairs the "Women's Major Group" at the United Nations, which assures women's participation in decision making on global policies regarding environment, development and gender.

WECF is the initiator of the EWA programme "Empowering Women benefits All", which is funded through the FLOW programme of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Women's Major Group position papers for CSW, Rio+20 and Sustainable Development Goals can be accessed through the website: www.wecf.eu

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