

Chapter 3

Women Plantation Workers

Poisoned and Silenced – How Long More?

Yes! This is the reality of the lives of women workers in the plantations in Malaysia. Women are not only caught in a web of exploitation at their workplace but are continuously silenced and subjugated by cultural, social and patriarchal norms that have become institutionalised.

Currently more than half of the workforce in plantations are women. The women continue to be employed as unskilled, temporary contract workers doing the most menial and underpaid jobs. Yet, as more and more Malaysian workers leave the plantations to work in the towns, the women stay back so that they can at least guarantee a roof over the heads of their children. Urbanisation and industrialisation has pushed men and the young to work in the new industrial zones. The women decide to stay on and continue to take on any job so that they can have a house and basic amenities, which are expensive and beyond the reach of plantation workers.

Historically, women were recruited into the plantations only after 1928 when the Indian Emigration Act was amended and enforced to change the sex ration rule of recruitment. The new rule required and allowed women to immigrate to Malaya. For every 3 males, 2 females should be assisted to emigrate. The key objective was to develop family units so that male workers would become permanent workers. This would then ensure a steady and permanent workforce that would be more productive. Consequently women played the dual role of providing cheap labour and social stability.

Hence, women became a source of cheap labour. They were recruited as field workers and later as tappers with unequal wages to that of the men. Since the families were in constant debt-bondage, the women were not in a position to demand better wages and conditions. The women were viewed as dependents of the male rubber tappers, and as such their wages were considered as supplementary to that of the men.

At the time women's work was irregular and temporary. Their wages were not only low but inconsistent with the men. The majority were field workers whose wages were much lower than the casual tappers. A primary reason for employing women as dependants of male tappers was vividly stated in a circular (NO. 12, 1931) by the Plantation Association of Malaya that read:

"The tappers' wages were not adequate to cover his dependants' cost of living. Either the tapper had to be paid enough to support his dependants or his dependants had to be employed. The latter of course was cheaper."

Geographically, the women together with the men and their children were isolated from the rest of Malaysian society. They lived in what is popularly called the 'green ghettos'. Today, the plantations are still our 'green ghettos' but the women are in a worse-off situation. These days, women often live in broken homes, many have separated from their husbands, and struggle on alone to manage the family. In all aspects, economically, political or socially, the women are isolated, remain subservient and exploited.

However, as Malaysia aggressively pushed on with its new economic strategies and policies, the lives of women in the plantations changed as well. In the early sixties, when synthetic rubber consumption rose to more than 60 per cent globally, rubber prices dropped sharply in the country. With the developed countries controlling synthetic rubber, Malaysian plantations saw that they could not compete even though they tried for higher yields using stimulants. This also saw the tapper being pressured to tap up to between 600 to 700 trees as averse to 350 trees per day. The plantation sector was under pressure to diversify and introduced oil palm as the alternative crop. This brought about a major restructuring of the workforce.

The switch to oil palm cultivation required more 'intensive care' from pests, and women were recruited as sprayers of pesticides and fertilizers. Photo: Tenaganita, 2002.



Consequently, the male workforce increased since it was only men who were employed as harvesters of oil palm fruits. Women who had been tappers, and recognised as skilled workers, lost their jobs. However, the oil palm crops required more intensive 'care' from pests. The use of pesticides became a major requirement, with frequent spraying becoming the norm. Women were recruited as sprayers of pesticides and fertilisers. Once again women lost their skills and were relegated to the status of 'unskilled workers', and used for maintenance of trees and soils, and collected loose fruits from the ground after harvest. As a result women worked in the most menial and hazardous jobs in the plantation. And today it is estimated that there are about 30,000 women pesticide sprayers in the country!

After more than 180 years, has the situation changed for women in the plantations? Unfortunately, in the experience of Tenaganita, the situation has become even worse. Tenaganita has been working with plantation workers since its inception in 1991. In the last 11 years Tenaganita has been conducting regular health workshops, interviews, surveys, counselling sessions, seminars, focused group discussions, leadership training and awareness campaigns with women plantation workers. This work and collaboration with women plantation workers has made it possible for Tenaganita to compile information about the work and life of plantation workers, and compile case studies of their exploitation as women, and as workers. The information in this chapter is based on 10 years worth of experience, work and sharing by women plantation workers.

In those early days, women who were working in the plantations did face hazards of snake bites, mosquitoes, and the impacts of carrying heavy buckets of latex to the collecting centre. But today the hazards are even worse. Women are poisoned slowly by chemicals they use each day in their workplace. Women's health has suffered from chronic poisoning, accidents, and violence and sexual abuse.

Women face multiple forms of violence. Many of the sprayers interviewed had been beaten, either by their fathers or husbands. Many had been raped during marriage, especially when they refused sex out of fear of bearing another child. Nalini in her interview stated; "*My husband would take all my overtime wages, go the alcohol shop, come home drunk, accuse me of having sex with others and then beat me up. I became a young widow when my husband, after too much of drinks, fell unconscious onto a railway track and was crushed by an oncoming train.*" (Please see the case studies included, 'Putting a face to the Statistics')

Some of the women also faced violence and sexual harassment at work. One woman even stated how she was sexually harassed by the 'mandor' or supervisor. This form of abuse has created fear among the women. The women who have spoken up were given spraying jobs deep in the interior of the estates.

Women have little recourse to treatment, cure or even basic first aid. Due to the absence of medical monitoring and a total lack of understanding of how women are affected by these chemicals, the extent of the impact of pesticides and chemicals on women, on their reproductive health and on their unborn children, is unknown.

Women are biologically different from men, although this makes very little difference in measures of performance. These biological differences have an impact on the way that women are affected by chemical poisons, particularly pesticides. The skin is the body's largest organ and 90 per cent of exposure to pesticides occurs through the skin. Women have thinner skin than men and may absorb more under similar levels of exposure. This predisposes women to higher absorption of chemicals into the body. In addition, certain persistent pesticides (such as DDT) are stored in fatty tissue and can stay in the body for many years. Since women have a higher percentage of body fat than men, they store more pesticides in their body. Most of the pesticides in use today do not stay in the body for more than two or three days. They are eliminated from the body through the urine. This is why it is very important for workers exposed to pesticide to drink lots of water. Women especially must drink lots of water since their renal function, compared to men, is slightly less efficient, especially during pregnancy (Moses, 1999).

Very few women know that the highest absorption point is the genital area especially through the vagina. For women who are brought up to feel ashamed of themselves, who refuse to look at their own vagina, they do not know the risks they are taking as pesticide sprayers. In fact, the patriarchal and cultural norms and practices that subordinate women and suppresses of her sexuality, makes women ignorant and vulnerable to pesticide poisoning. As this study reveals, women experience severe vaginal burning sensations after spraying but suffer in silence. Since hospital assistants (HA) are usually male, women are shy and ashamed to state this problem to the men, and the problem goes unchecked. This underlines the dilemma and lack of gender sensitivity prevalent in plantations, and in medical facilities.

The developing foetus is protected by the placenta. While the placenta does an admirable job of keeping bacteria out, it does however allow certain toxic chemicals including toxic pesticides to cross the placenta. Women, let it be farmers or workers, continue to spray even when they are pregnant. This brings not only high risks to the pregnancy itself, but also to the child who faces the risk of chronic poisoning, and being born with abnormalities or deformities. Several pesticides can disrupt the body's endocrine or hormonal system. These endocrine disruptors can mimic and alter the normal functions of hormones, tamper with hormonal balances in the body and thus affect reproductive systems. These chemicals can also bring about certain types of genital birth defects and cancers. The developing child in the womb of a woman is vulnerable to pesticide poisons. For women, the risk of developing breast cancer is also very high and probable.

Confronted with these risks to women's health, reproductive health and possible negative impacts of chemicals on our children, it is crucial that women become aware and intervene. However, this process for change will be challenged as Malaysia is now undergoing its eighth development plan, with moves to develop the agriculture sector with the objective of strengthening the agribusiness industry. With this goal, we can foresee an increase in the use of chemicals. During the economic crisis that took a toll on our country, the key saving product was palm oil. The commodity price went up and the demand grew in the international market. Today palm oil is seen as a stable crop and produce. Thus we can expect the plantations to remain and production to increase in the coming years. This would indeed further aggravate the situation of pesticide poisoning among the plantation workers.

Women's health is definitely at risk and at what cost? Before our future is stolen, and women continue to be exploited, abused and poisoned we need to act with a strong gender perspective.

Putting a Face to the Statistics - 2 Case Histories

Case History 1- *Parames*

Parames (not her real name) dropped out of school after five years of education in a Tamil school situated in the plantation where her parents worked. She stayed back at home to help her siblings and her parents. At the age of 14, she fell in love with a boy who came to work in the same estate where she resided. Parames' parents vehemently opposed the relationship. So Parames and her boyfriend, Karu, eloped to get married. She stayed with him for a year and then when Parames got the blessings from her parents, she officially married Karu. She was 19 years old.

"The five years of love and courtship turned into nightmare on the third day of my marriage when Karu started beating me up. This violence and nightmare went on throughout the marriage. I have three children, two boys and a girl. All of them are grown up and working with independent lives. I aborted my fourth pregnancy as I was afraid to have any children since the marriage was unstable. My husband constantly accused me of having extra marital affairs. I feared that another pregnancy would mean more beatings and sexual abuse.

I remember how one day Karu beat me up badly and locked me up in a room. My four year old boy, opened the door and begged me to leave the house. I then decided to leave. Together with my three children, we walked over 15 kilometers to my parents home. Concerned over the sanctity of marriage, of their reputation and of my work in the plantation, my parents sent me back with my brother-in-law, requesting him to take care of me and the children. My husband hardly supported the family. I managed to run the house with my wages and contributions from my brothers and sisters. Brought up to be a faithful wife, I gave in whenever Karu demanded sex from me. Sometimes he has even called me a prostitute. Many times I reflected that a prostitute at least got money when she gave her body for sex. I received nothing except abuse and beatings.

I not only faced abuse and problems in my family life, but also at work. I started work under the contract system at the age of 15. Under the Employment Act, a person can only be employed when she is 16 years old. My work and responsibilities were weeding, applying some kind of powder to the oil palm fruit bunch so that it will grow bigger. I also added a kind of

white powder to the pollen and mixed both male and female flowers for better fruiting.

When I turned 16, I became a permanent worker where I applied rat poison, manure and chemicals on to rubber trees for increase in latex production. When I began work, initially, two workers used a bag of manure weighing 50pounds for 450 trees in a day. Later this was increased to 12 bags, then 15 and now 20 bags per day. This demand for high productivity has had a tremendous impact on my body. I experienced severe pains on my back, arms and legs but there was no experience of higher wages.

After my third child, I opted to become a sprayer as I could earn 50 cents more each day and I could come home by 2.00 p.m., as compared to others who came home after 3.00p.m. I started applying pesticides to grass, 'lallang' (weeds), on the oil palm trees, and onto creepers on the ground. I sprayed strong chemicals to unwanted trees. I never knew the names of these chemicals nor their impact on me. I even used my bare hands to apply an oil based chemical on to the 'lallang' to kill them. I have used gramaxone / paraquat, commonly known as 'kopi-O'. I was a very good worker. I sprayed 22-24 tanks of pesticides each day. Each tank contained 4 gallons of pesticides. The management constantly praised me for my high ability. I was proud that I could protect the trees from pests, and keep the estate clean of weeds.

At the beginning, when I started handling the pesticides, I experienced headaches. During the hot season, when I used gramaxone in particular, my nose bled. I used to get severe pains on the left side of my stomach. When I raised these medical problems with the estate paramedic, called the 'hospital assistant' or 'HA', he gave some tablets, which I took. I believe they were painkillers. I did not take medical leave as I prided myself in being a good worker and did not want to lose out on the incentive benefits.

Since the estate was large, the sprayers were taken on tractors with their tanks and the chemicals for the task ahead for the day. One day there was an accident, and tractor turned over. I suffered from injuries but was not compensated. Being ignorant of the law, I did not make any demands. The Union too was silent about it as we did receive medical treatment.

My concern was to do my job well. Since I did not get any skin problems except bleeding of the nose, I did not mind my job and found it safe.

However after 8 years of spraying and being a hardworking woman, I began to have stomach pains regularly. One day the pain became very severe, and I could not bear it. I went to a private clinic where the doctor gave me an injection. He told me I had ulcers in my stomach. A fulltime worker with an environment group, Friends of the Earth, contacted me. He took me to see another doctor who did an X-ray and a kind of scan. He told me I had ulcers in my throat and my stomach. He advised me not to spray pesticides and not to carry the heavy bunches of oil palm fruits. But the supervisor of the estate insisted that I continue spraying pesticides. With an irresponsible husband, and my children depended solely on me. I had no choice except to continue spraying.

A few days later while I was coming home after work, I collapsed in the tractor that was bringing me back with the others. I was taken to the Elmina estate group hospital and then transferred to the government hospital. Nothing was discovered. All I knew was that my whole body was feeling more and more pain. I began to go for regular check ups at the government General Hospital in Kuala Lumpur. At this hospital, the specialist told me that something was wrong with my nerves. I also began to lose weight and became very thin. Later the doctor told me that my nerves had been affected probably by pesticide poisoning. I had to take medicines daily.

My health worsened. I began to have severe headaches. My menses was no more regular. I got my menses twice a month and it lasted for 3-4 days. I had prolapsed womb as well. Finally, the doctor gave me a letter for the Management, requesting that I be given light jobs in the estate. This request was turned down and I was told that there were no light jobs.

During this period, I came in contact with Tenaganita. I participated in their training programs and became more courageous. I went to the Labor department and lodged a complaint since the Union too had failed to support my request. It was after this action that I got the sweeping job. In spite of the light job, I continued to have the severe headaches and chest pains. In fact, during one of my visits to a Gynaecologist arranged by Tenaganita, I found out I had excessive white discharge as well. I continued to go for leadership programs and later stood for elections as a Union committee member. I won and began to be active in the Union.

If I had known of the dangers of pesticides, especially on women, I would have not taken the job as a sprayer. I would have campaigned more aggressively so that other women too will not be affected. Tenaganita tried to help me to be medically boarded out under the Social security scheme. I refused. I had heard that the estate would be sold and there would be an offer of houses as compensation for the workers. If I stopped work, I would lose the house. And so I continue to work, in spite of my poor health, with the hope of a house, a roof over my head, soon."

Case History 2 - Nandini

Nandini comes from Perak, a state north of Kuala Lumpur. At the time of the interview, Nandini was 32 years old. She is a pesticide sprayer and a permanent worker in the estate. Nandini is a widow with four children, the eldest being 8 years and the youngest, only three. Her education in school ended in Primary school. She refused to continue her schooling as she could not stand the teasing she got from boys on a daily basis. When she came of age and got her first menses, her mother told her nothing about growing up or what changes will take place in

her body. All that her mother did was warn her not to mix with or play with boys anymore. She never knew the reason except that she was considered to be a grown up girl. And about her work, marriage, health and fears, this is what Nandini has to say.

"In 1982, I started helping my mother to tap rubber trees in the rubber plantation we lived in. I did this for six years with no wages at all. The number of trees my mother had to tap per day went up from 250, to 450 and then to 600 trees per day. Without help

from children like me, rubber tappers would not be able to complete their task for the day. When I became 20 years old, I began to work in the same estate as a permanent worker. I do weeding, pesticide spraying and pruning. I worked both in the rubber plantation and the oil palm plantation. My basic salary is only RM15.00 per day. I am paid daily. On rainy days, when I cannot work, I do not get any wages. My actual take home pay is less than RM300 per month, in spite of the hard work we do each day.

I fell in love with Ram when I met him at my sister's house. Ram, like me, had just broken a relationship. I was surprised when my mother accepted him and requested that his parents come over to ask for my hand in marriage. He took me over to his aunt's house and I spent the night with him. I was so afraid to tell my mother the truth. I ran away with him to his hometown in Baling. My sister got us married in a temple. It was only after the first child was born that we legally registered our marriage. He was good to me at the beginning. But later, he began to take 'samsu' (alcohol) with his friends. Whenever I questioned him, he would shout, scold and beat me up. I was constantly accused of having 'affairs' with other men. In spite of knowing karate, I could not hit him back because he was my husband. I had to respect the 'tali' round my neck, which he tied on our wedding day.

I was afraid that I would go through the same fate as my mother's sister. She could not stand my uncle's abuses and violence. My aunt committed suicide by burning herself with kerosene. In fact, her husband was not the only batterer and drunkard, but all my uncles, husbands to my mother's sisters, were drunkards and abusers.

However, my fate took a different twist. In 1998, my husband was drunk and had fallen asleep or unconscious on a railway track. He was run over by an oncoming train. My life became terrible and I was very lonely. There were times when I even contemplated suicide. But the thought of my four children kept me going. My mother became a pillar of strength, while my relatives were only interested in the money I would get both from the Employer's Provident Fund (EPF) and the social security scheme arising from my husband's death.

My health too began to take a downturn. As a pesticide sprayer, I used to spray Roundup, Paraquat,

Amin, Tamarin and Ally. I used to spray more than 10 tanks of pesticides. After spraying, I had very bad headaches, felt nausea, giddiness, tightness of the chest as well as chest pains. I used to find cracks on my chest but did not take it seriously. I believed that all these pains and symptoms were part of the result of hard work. It was all normal. However, I noticed that the cracks became hard, and my breasts became very painful. There is pus in my breasts and they are swollen.

I went to the paramedic, the hospital assistant employed by the estate. He was a male paramedic. I was too shy and afraid to tell him about the swelling in my breasts. How could I ever show my breasts to a man who is not my husband? So, I just told him that I had chest pains. He gave me some tablets to take. But the pain became severe after I had taken the pills. I confided with a friend about my problem. She scolded me and took me to see a medical officer at the General Hospital. I was told that nothing was wrong with me. The doctor gave me some panadol to take.

Two days later the pain became unbearable. I began to vomit and ran a fever. My breasts were swollen. I found out that there was a doctor who was active in an NGO and he was very sympathetic. So, I went to see him. He checked my breasts and found lumps in my breast. He referred me to another hospital to do an X-ray and a biopsy. A specialist checked me again and said he suspected that I could have breast cancer. But when the results came back after the biopsy, it was negative. I was really happy.

I continue to take medication and rub cream over my breasts. All these seem to be very temporary. The swelling, the pus and the pain seem to reoccur. Now, there are lumps under my armpit as well. I really don't know what is my health problem. In fact, I have become weaker. I have more headaches and the left nostril of my nose has become very painful. My whole body is in a wreck. I have had excessive white discharge for two weeks continuously. I have been given tablets and supportise to insert into my vagina. My lower back gets painful. I also suffer from constipation regularly. My constant prayer is that God will take away my illness. I am really tired of going from clinic to clinic and hospital to hospital. I need to work to support my children. I can only try to bear the pains and continue to work as a pesticide sprayer."

Accountability

In looking at the conditions of the workers in the plantations and more critically on the lives of the women pesticide sprayers, we need to assess the different players and stakeholders who have created conditions that are adversely affecting women workers health and well being, and therefore have a role and responsibility towards the women plantation workers.

1. The Plantation Industry

The owners and the management of the plantations make the decisions on the tasks, the method of spraying, the type of pesticides used, the health care services and the actions taken when a complaint is lodged.

Reports from plantation workers indicate that the plantation industry has failed to set up safety committees and adhere to the Occupational and Safety Act. Worse, it has not given the workers appropriate information on the poisons they would have to handle and use. The industry is fully aware of the dangers that these poisons pose, as there have been various advocacy initiatives carried out to highlight these issues since 1984. It still continues to use very highly toxic pesticides. However, it has developed strategies so that it will not be made accountable.

The industry has structured the task of spraying into the 'sub-contractual work' category. As such, the workers come directly under the supervision of the sub contractor. Many remain as temporary workers, and in this way the industry has abdicated its responsibility. Its concern is only profits and not the lives of the workers who have brought in the wealth to the industry.

In addition workers are for the most part ignorant of what they are using, reports from the workers show that they are not told about the pesticides they are using, they do not have access to the pesticide labels and often have no indication of what they spraying. The Highly Toxic Pesticide Regulation 1996 requires that workers spraying paraquat, monocrotophos or calcium cyanide have to be monitored for the impact of the pesticide on their health.

According to the guidelines under the Act the employer must maintain a record of the use of these highly toxic pesticides, the sprayers involved, and the total number of work hours and the amount of pesticides received and used. This raises some major questions: If the workers are ignorant of the pesticides they are spraying, they would have no idea if they are using the list of pesticides under the Highly Toxic Pesticide Regulation; in which case, the plantation management could be hiding behind this "ignorance" and not adhere to the regulations as required under the Act.

The guidelines of the Act also require every employer to institute a programme of Medical Examination. But in reality workers can only have access to medical care via the hospital assistant (HA). Again the reports from workers indicate that the paramedic has strict instructions to ensure that the workers continue to work even if they are ill. Feedback from workers reflect that the HAs only provide very basic and minimum treatment for the acute poisoning, and ensures that the worker returns to work. Many do not make proper referrals. The worker therefore is unable to obtain effective treatment or recognize the symptoms as poisoning. The paramedics are neither given training on monitoring, nor on the OSHA Act.

2. The Pesticide Industry

The Pesticide Industry works closely with the plantation industry. It does not come directly in contact with the applicators. This distance makes the industry invisible in its role of promoting the use of chemicals in the plantation sector. The pesticide industry is responsible to ensure that the pesticides it manufactures and distributes do not poison workers, the public and the environment. But looking at the instances of reported poisoning, the industry has not, or has been very slow, in taking action to address these issues, and has often been more vocal in denying that poisoning has taken place. The Pesticide Act is itself weak in ensuring the accountability of the pesticide industry that continues to sell poisons.

3. The Government of the day – The Enforcement Agencies

Two major enforcement agencies, the Pesticide Board and the Department of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH) are responsible to ensure protection and safety of the workers from poisons. Overall, there is a lack of monitoring of the sale, use and impact of the poisons in the plantations.

The weak implementation of the regulations in the plantation sector has led to women workers being poisoned daily. Besides this, health or medical personnel have not been trained effectively to deal with pesticide poisoning and health. Thus the government is equally accountable for the current health crisis of plantation women sprayers.

4. The Trade Union

The plantation workers had been organised since before the independence of the country. The trade union called 'The National Union of Plantation Workers' (NUPW) emerged as the largest and richest union in the country. But in less than 15 years, its membership of about 140,000 has dwindled to less than 35,000. Today the union members contribute the highest union subscription in the country. And in spite of the high union fees, the plantation workers remain amongst the poorest and most marginalised workers. Today, 60 per cent of the Union membership is women.

It is evident that the Union has failed miserably to protect the workers from being poisoned. The leadership has become indifferent to the issue of pesticide poisoning. Instead it has bargained for slightly higher wages for sprayers, as compared to a general worker, as it has termed pesticide spraying a 'high-risk' job. The sprayer now gets 50 sen (approximately 12 U.S. cents) extra each day. The Union has also compromised women's health and the health of our future generation for this negligible increase in wages. The leadership lacks gender perspective. This is reflected in the absence of programs for women and lack of women leaders in the Union itself. There is a lack of education programs to create awareness on hazards, on the regulations and the need for effective safety committees. In short the Union has failed to address the frightening reality of women workers and their daily exposure to poisons.

The silence of the Union together with the ineffectiveness of the enforcement agencies has only allowed the two major industries, i.e. the Plantation and the Pesticide industries, to continue the practices that poison women daily. With the absence of proper monitoring mechanisms and support systems, women pesticide sprayer continues to be poisoned, silenced and isolated.

New Emerging Issue

The phenomenon of hiring migrant workers is a growing one, with majority employed as contract labour. Hence, activities are often sub-contracted to businesses or agents who supply these contract workers to undertake various jobs on the plantation. When a migrant worker is documented he has a work permit valid for one year, with levy and visa payments made to the Immigration department. The work permit is issued under the name of the specific enterprise or industry he is employed. However, a large majority of the migrant labor in the plantations is sub-contracted labor, and the migrant worker—who for example is a pesticide sprayer—works in different plantations. As such, migrant labourers are not considered employees of the plantation industry. This being the case, we can see that there is a conflict between the terms for a valid work permit, and that of a sub-contracted work system. In this scenario of employment, the contractor who employs the migrant labor does not obtain a work permit for his workers as they do not work in one particular plantation industry but in many others as well. Consequently, large numbers of migrant workers under the sub-contract system of employment remain undocumented. They are unprotected by all the labor regulations, are highly mobile and face the high risk of being arrested, detained and deported. Thus these workers are also highly vulnerable and face acute risks to their health with no access to medical care or treatment.