

MERCURY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Situation of Women in the Venezuelan Amazon

Information Sheet 2
2024

General context

Mercury is a toxic substance that can cause serious health problems. The main source of mercury pollution on a global scale comes from small and medium-scale gold mining. In Venezuela, the impact of gold mining on women has been studied from the perspective of its possible impact on the health of women and their children, as well as a form of violence and oppression against them. This form of violence against women is rarely recognized and tackled.

Mercury pollution can have different sources, ranging from gold processing activities to the consumption of food contaminated by a form of the metal known as methylmercury. The frequent use of mercury in mining without any form of protection puts women who reside or work in gold-processing areas at serious risk. Mercury poisoning causes damage to the central nervous system, the immune and digestive systems, skin, lungs, kidneys and eyes, or even death. It also affects the human reproductive function, reducing fertility and increasing the risk of miscarriage.

In women of childbearing age, methylmercury can penetrate the placental barriers and seriously affect fetal development.

Situation of women with respect to mercury pollution in Venezuela

trade of the mineral. These women also act as providers of food, drinks, utensils and services (cleaning, laundry, sex, entertainment in nightclubs).

In these contexts, even if women do not engage directly in the processing of gold, they are exposed to poisoning by inhalation of mercury vapor released during burning in gold refining. Despite the serious risks associated with this activity, many women perceive it as an opportunity to escape poverty or even survive.

Studies conducted in El Callao and other mining areas of Bolívar state, mainly between 2006 and 2021, found high levels of mercury in local women, in some cases requiring immediate



Pregnant woman working in a mine: Photography by Magda Gibelli. Taken from OpenDemocracy

medical attention. Some of these studies indicated that women were at greatest risk of mercury poisoning, not only for their work in gold processing activities but also through the consumption of fish contaminated with methylmercury.

Likewise, other studies found high mercury concentration levels in Indigenous women living in communities near the Guri reservoir of the lower course of the Caroní River, the Paragua River, and the middle and lower course of the Caura River.

Much of this research raised concerns not only about women's health but also about the possible effects of mercury exposure in pregnant women on the neurological development of the fetus.

Currently, the extent of mercury exposure among women in areas affected by illegal gold mining in the south of the country remains unknown.

Government action

- No information was found on the conduction by the Venezuelan State of activities of epidemiological surveillance of mercury exposure in women.
- No action is known to have been taken by the Venezuelan State to assist women affected by mercury pollution or prevent this form of pollution in mining areas.

- In 2016, the National Executive Branch issued a Decree prohibiting the use, possession, storage and transportation of mercury for the treatment of gold in all stages of mining. There is no evidence of the enforcement of this Decree in any gold mining area of the country.
- The Venezuelan State has not ratified the Minamata Convention.

Challenges

- Conducting an epidemiological and ecotoxicological assessment of mercury pollution levels in all areas with a presence of illegal gold mining in the Venezuelan Amazon.
- Ensuring protection for victims of mercury pollution, including the restoration of women's health and reparation for victims.
- Educating all women in risk areas in adopting habits to avoid or mitigate mercury exposure in themselves and their families.
- Securing effective control of the trade and use of mercury in the Venezuelan Amazon.
- Establishing sanitation and environmental restoration measures in all areas affected by the use of mercury.
- Generating effective mechanisms for the control and eradication of illegal mining in the Venezuelan Amazon.
- Raising awareness of the situation of women affected by exposure to mercury from illegal gold mining in Venezuela.

Human rights framework

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognizes the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women establishes the right of women to protection of health, including reproductive health, and to safety in working conditions.

The Minamata Convention, which Venezuela has not ratified, establishes the need to devise strategies to prevent the exposure of vulnerable populations to mercury used in artisanal and small-scale gold mining, including women of childbearing age, especially pregnant women.

The 1999 Constitution incorporates the right to enjoy a safe, healthy and ecologically

balanced life and environment (Art. 127), as well as the obligation of the State to guarantee the life of the population in an environment free of pollution.

The Organic Law on the Right of Women to Life Free from Violence establishes the right of women to life, dignity and physical, psychological, sexual, patrimonial and legal integrity, as well as to be protected from any labor that may pose a risk or harm to their health or full development.

In 2018, the Special Rapporteur on the implications for human rights of the environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and wastes called on States and businesses to pay special attention to protecting women's reproductive health by preventing their exposure to toxic substances.

Recommendations

- Declare a national emergency due to mercury pollution in the Venezuelan Amazon to allow the mobilization of financial and human resources and international support aimed at solving the problem.
- Implement effective and gradual actions to eradicate mining extractivism as a means of State financing.
- Ratify the Minamata Convention and immediately set up a National Action Plan that establishes effective processes for the regulation of mercury imports in the country, the elimination of its use, and the regulation of the artisanal and small-scale mining sector to move toward the complete elimination of alluvial mining.
- Establish a mercury pollution assessment program, with an emphasis on women of childbearing age, pregnant women and nursing mothers, to identify at-risk populations, associated health effects, and actions to reduce exposure to this form of pollution, as well as to provide care for those affected.
- Implement a training program directed at all women in mining areas.
- Strengthen institutional capacities for the investigation and treatment of mercury poisoning in women.

Source: *Clima21 (2024) A slow crime: Situation of vulnerable groups in the face of mercury pollution in the Venezuelan Amazon.*
<https://clima21.net/noticias/a-slow-crime-situation-of-vulnerable-groups-in-the-face-of-mercury-pollution-in-the-venezuelan-amazon/>

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