

GENDER HEROES OF THE ASIA-PACIFIC

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Rural women are playing a leading role in the campaign against highly hazardous pesticides and in the promotion of ecological agriculture as a viable alternative. The Pesticides Action Network in Asia Pacific (PAN AP) has been working closely with rural communities to further strengthen the role that such women can play.

Pesticide production and its use have commonly prioritized profits over the health of communities and the environment. As such, food sources and the environment of many rural communities have been adversely impacted. Farmers and agricultural workers that are heavily exposed to pesticides suffer a range of acute and chronic health effects. But the health impact has been especially harmful for rural women and children, who are at risk of endocrine disruption, among others.

PAN AP thus challenges the dependency of small farmers on pesticides and helps empower communities to work towards the reduction and elimination of pesticide use. It focuses on women workers and farmers in Asia since their problems and issues are often not addressed due to marginalisation by cultural and social norms.

Among the approaches that PAN AP has been using is participatory action research through Community-based Pesticide Action Monitoring (CPAM). CPAM helps communities document the adverse impacts of pesticides, raises awareness and motivates them to adopt ecologically sound and sustainable agricultural practices. It also prompts them to influence governments and campaign for better pesticide regulation and implementation of international conventions on pesticides. Importantly, CPAM also provides leadership training for rural women.

In the past 10 years, learning exchanges and capacity-building workshops have been organized and CPAM surveys carried out in countries including Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Mongolia, the Philippines, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. The results of these surveys were compiled and discussed at national and international meetings, stressing the need for national and global action.

¹⁰ <http://www.panap.net/>



In 2010, PAN AP published the landmark “Asian Regional Report¹¹” produced by 12 organizations from 8 Asian countries. It was followed by the publication “Communities in Peril: Global Report on Health Impacts of Pesticide Use in Agriculture¹²”. These publications helped in raising awareness and contributed to the campaign led by the NGO Tenaganita and female workers that stopped the use of paraquat and monocrotophos by a plantation operator in Malaysia and Indonesia.

As an alternative to pesticide use, CPAM encourages farming communities to move towards organic or ecological agriculture. PAN AP has worked with Vikalpani (Sri Lankan Women’s Federation) on a series of training workshops on organic farming for its members. Many of them are now practicing organic agriculture in their home gardens and in their rice fields. One participant, Amara, went back to her community Monaragala and initiated awareness campaigns on pesticide impacts on health and the environment. She inspired the women in her community to learn ecological agriculture. Amara is now a well-established community leader and continues to pursue the empowerment of rural women and the promotion of ecological agriculture.

Another CPAM training participant is Huong from Vietnam. She was among those who pioneered training on Integrated Pest Management and Systems of Rice Intensification through farmer field schools. In these field schools, gender and environmental issues are discussed hand-in-hand. As President of the Women’s Union, Huong also organised the “No Pesticides Use Week” in

¹¹ http://www.panap.net/panfiles/download/asrep_lowres.pdf

¹² <http://www.panap.net/en/p/post/pesticides-cpam/78>



Hai Van, which involved many women. This initiative highlighted the women's demand for accessible and affordable agricultural inputs and less use of highly toxic pesticides.

In India, the local community in Kasargod, which has been working with PAN AP partner Thanal, has successfully stopped the use of endosulfan after more than 10 years of campaigning, first in Kerala, then in other parts of India. The struggle of the community in Kasargod, where women leaders played a key role, as well as the support of many civil society organisations, inspired the inclusion of endosulfan in the list of Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) in the Stockholm Convention.

PAN AP continues its work to support the struggles of communities against pesticides; for the empowerment of rural women; and for the promotion of food sovereignty and ecological agriculture as alternatives. It has built solid partnerships with peasants, agricultural workers and rural women's movements in the Asia Pacific region. PAN AP now comprises 108 network partners in the region and has links with about 400 other civil society and grassroots organizations, at the national, regional and global levels.

Based on its experience, PAN AP's greatest asset and most powerful resource is its strong and growing network of people's organizations and marginalized communities. Having such a dynamic network that represents diverse movements and organizations allows PAN AP to build on its gains and to replicate its success stories through its various advocacies, including the elimination of hazardous pesticides and the promotion of ecological agriculture through the meaningful participation and leadership of rural women.