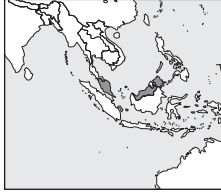


■ MALAYSIA

Plantation workers face poverty and poison



Women's empowerment efforts in Malaysia have been unequal. Plantation workers who sustain the nation's palm oil and rubber production are still the poorest and most vulnerable. They receive very poor wages, endure sexual harassment, and are the victims of agro-chemical poisoning.

Consumers' Association of Penang

Mageswari Sangaralingam

Malaysia registered impressive economic growth rates in recent years. Despite this growth there are still vulnerable groups who live in poverty, such as the elderly, the rural poor, single female headed households, indigenous people of Peninsular and East Malaysia, migrant workers and unskilled workers. The dynamic changes created by the process of economic transformation have increased poverty levels for some of these groups.¹

A decline in poverty

Malaysia's policy against poverty first took shape with the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970, thus emphasizing its importance in overall national development. When the National Development Policy (NDP) 1991-2000 was introduced to replace the NEP some modifications were made to the poverty reduction policy but its basic features were retained. Subsequently the National Economic Recovery Plan (NERP) also dealt with the need to address the problems of the poor as a result of the economic downturn following the 1997 financial crisis.²

The ultimate objective of the public policy against poverty, as stated in the NEP, was to reduce the incidence of poverty by set time periods and eventually to totally eradicate it. Another objective of the policy was to reduce relative poverty and income inequality. During the NEP years, the focus was on the reduction of the gaps between the main ethnic groups, rural and urban dwellers, and income groups. Reducing intra-ethnic income gaps also became an objective of the NDP.³

The primary strategies selected to reduce and eradicate poverty were ones which provide opportunities to the poor to gain employment in higher-paying jobs or activities in order to increase their incomes and become self-supporting.

Official statistics show that the incidence of poverty among Malaysians decreased from 7.5% in 1999 to 5.1% in 2002. The number of poor households declined by 25.6% to 267,900 in 2005.⁴ The overall decline in poverty was attributed to the Government's efforts to implement poverty eradication programmes, particularly through the promotion of income generating projects.

The incidence of poverty is reportedly highest among agricultural, hunting and forestry workers at 14.5%. Rural households headed by the elderly (65 years old and above) and female-headed households registered high incidences of poverty at 28.6% and 25.7%.⁵

To assist marginalized sectors of society, the 2005 national budget directed resources to the disabled, lower income groups, education, indigenous groups, small businesses, gender development programmes and other social services. There is also a specific allocation of MYR 37.8 million (USD 10 million) for gender development programmes. Nevertheless the crux of the issue is how these allocations are going to be used to implement projects that will truly benefit the target group.

The forgotten sector

Women plantation workers appear to have been neglected in the Government's plans to eradicate poverty and enhance the status of women. The progress achieved so far in empowering women has been unequal. Women plantation workers still lag behind, since they are unable to free themselves from the vicious cycle of poverty they find themselves in.

The plantation industry is a crucial part of the country's development. Malaysia is a world leader in palm oil and natural rubber production and the cultivation of these crops is a major agricultural activity in the country. Apart from smallholders who depend on these commodities for their livelihood, there are also waged labourers employed by plantation companies. In 2005, an estimated 1,268,500 people were employed in the agriculture and fishery sector, which includes farm workers, plantation

workers and forestry workers.⁶ Large segments of the population involved in the agriculture and plantation sector are poor.

In recent years, the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) has been working with labourers on oil palm and rubber plantations on the Peninsula. We have been involved in occupational health and safety issues, the fight for better wages, securing basic needs such as housing, health and sanitation, and other social issues such as domestic violence and alcohol abuse. In the area of occupational health and safety, the primary concern has been the use of highly hazardous herbicides such as paraquat, which was only recently banned in Malaysia.

Currently women make up nearly half the workforce on plantations where spraying a variety of herbicides is an integral part of plantation work. The reason why plantation companies employ women as herbicide sprayers is because women are readily available since they are unable to find other jobs. They are also considered timid, docile and compliant workers, as they do not question management and are easy to manipulate. Decades ago, when only men were employed as sprayers, they were not as obliging and did not do as good a job as women do.

Risk factors

Most women on the plantations were born and raised there, as were their parents and grandparents. The environment on the plantation is hardly conducive to attaining a decent education or acquiring the critical skills needed in more specialized sectors of the economy. Studies have shown that women in poor rural households attain lower levels of education.⁷ This fact added to the prevailing poverty places women on plantations in a very vulnerable position.

Lack of education, age and social exclusion therefore diminish women's opportunities and limit their possibilities for joining mainstream jobs in the industrial and service sector. Since most companies provide housing for their workers, this is a further incentive for women to continue living on the plantation.

1 Sulochana Nair, Dr, Poverty in the New Millennium - Challenges for Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur: University Malaysia, 2000.

2 Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department. "Malaysia: 30 Years of Poverty Reduction, Growth and Racial Harmony", Presented at Shanghai Poverty Conference- Scaling Up Poverty, 12 March 2004 in Shanghai, China.

3 Ibid.

4 Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department. Mid-Term Review of the Eighth Malaysia Plan 2001-2005, 2003, p. 60.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid, p. 98.

7 Tan, PC and NP Tey. Prevalence and Profile of Female Household Heads, Ministry of National Unity and Social Development and National Population and Family Development Board. Kuala Lumpur, 1993.



Nowadays many plantations have started employing migrant workers to carry out this hazardous job. The number of foreign workers, mainly men, employed in the agriculture sector has increased from 175,834 in 2000 to 327,490 in 2003.⁸ All things being equal, women are nevertheless more affected than men.

Poisoning

In 2004, CAP conducted a study of 11 oil palm plantations located in the northern states of Malaysia. The study focused on women herbicide sprayers, their working conditions and the consequent health impacts.⁹

Work on an oil palm plantation is back-breaking and hazardous. Women herbicide sprayers are expected to carry an 18-litre (4-gallon) drum containing herbicide and complete 14 to 16 rounds of spraying per day. Tractor spraying is also conducted on some plantations, where big drums of herbicide are placed on both sides of the tractor. Two women carry the pumps and spray as the tractor moves.

In either case, the sprayers themselves are engulfed in a fine mist of herbicide. Recommended safety measures are rarely employed. The use of protective masks, gloves and boots is often impractical owing to the hot and humid tropical climate. Due to the widespread lack of awareness of the hazards of herbicides, inhalation and skin absorption are the major causes of occupational poisoning cases among women sprayers.

On the plantations, management decides which pesticides or herbicides to use as well as their frequency of application. The majority of workers interviewed did not even know what herbicides they were using while others identified them only by colour or odour. The women obligingly carried out their supervisors' instructions on proportions and mixing of the herbicides. Most of the women were not even aware of the toxicity of the chemicals and the dangers that they were being exposed to.

The only protection women wear are safety boots and maybe a handkerchief or towel to cover their mouth and nose. The women complain that management is reluctant to replace worn personal protective equipment and demand that workers show them the damaged equipment. Even so, they only replace equipment periodically. Most women must purchase their own safety boots since they cannot get replacement for torn boots from their employers. Others do not replace their boots since they cannot afford to do so.

⁸ Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department, 2003, op cit, p. 171.

⁹ Consumers' Association of Penang. Survey Report on Women Herbicide Sprayers in Oil Palm Plantation: Working Conditions and Health Impact. 2004.

Miserable wages

The women work six days a week on a rotational basis and receive menial wages in return for their work. Earning their full weekly wage usually involves working long hours in the blazing sun. Furthermore, fear of losing their job makes them put up with unpleasant conditions including offensive remarks and undue pressure, while at times being subject to sexual harassment.

Workers are paid between MYR 15 to MYR 18 (USD 3.95 to USD 4.75) per day. Each herbicide sprayer earns MYR 350 to 450 (USD 92 to 118) per month. Some plantation companies give an extra MYR 2 (about USD 0.50) per day to herbicide sprayers. This is a clear indication that danger lurks in herbicide spraying compared to other work. On some plantations, electricity and water bills are deducted from salaries.

The survey results found that women sprayers are often not in good health. They suffer from acute and chronic ailments related to their work. Most plantations provide medical facilities for their workers although most of the time these facilities are inadequate and ineffective. If the women suffer from major illnesses that the plantation paramedic cannot treat, they must visit a medical doctor in the nearest town. Ill health affects productivity directly, so many illnesses go unreported.

Another disturbing revelation is that, as they are not provided with protective equipment, workers who are employed on a contractual basis work in worse conditions and are expected to manipulate more potent and harmful herbicides, including monosodium glutamate, and do not have medical coverage.

Limited options

Why do the women remain on the plantations despite the poverty they experience and exposure to poisons? During the 1980's many plantations replaced rubber trees with oil palms due to higher economic returns. Therefore women plantation workers who were previously skilled rubber tappers lost their source of livelihood. Some of the women had tapped rubber all of their working-life and were therefore left in a difficult employment situation. In order not to be evicted from the plantation, the women had no choice but accept any job offered by management. Hence the women became herbicide sprayers even though it was not their choice of work.

As palm oil commodity prices increase in coming years, we can expect Malaysian production also to increase since it is one of the country's major crops. This will further intensify women's involvement in the sector. Women will find it increasingly difficult to escape this vicious cycle of poverty and their increasingly poor health will be the price they pay.

Only those with the determination and will-power to leave the plantation sector at any cost can break away from poverty. But for some families who leave the plantation, whether of their own accord or when plantations are converted for other development projects, poverty will still be a way of life. These families usually migrate to urban areas, only to join the ranks of the urban poor who live in squatter settlements. These displaced workers with low levels of education and skills have to compete with other marginalized groups, including foreign workers, for low-paying jobs.

There is still work to be done

The immediate challenge for poverty reduction in Malaysia is to raise the incomes of the poorest of the poor. In a multi-racial nation with widely and well-established disparity in economic opportunities and incomes, the Government must intervene to ensure fairer distribution of opportunities and incomes among all racial and social groups.

It is difficult to break out of a poverty situation and education is one of the means by which families on plantations can escape poverty. For this reason, there is a need for policy and programme interventions to assist and encourage the children of plantation workers to pursue their education.

To conclude, the process and policy of development in Malaysia should focus on lower income groups - including women on plantations - in order to raise their income and social status, both in absolute and relative terms. This is the most effective means of achieving social justice, which is the foundation for genuine development. ■