



Women's health and the Canadian Environmental Protection Act

The *Canadian Environmental Protection Act, 1999* (CEPA) provides the legislative framework for protecting human health and the environment from pollution and toxics. However, preventable toxic exposure continues to be a public health and environmental justice problem with important gendered and sex-specific dimensions. Chemicals in cosmetics and consumer products contribute to the toxic burden associated with breast cancer, reproductive health effects and other women's health issues.¹

We are witnessing the disproportionate impact that the pandemic is having on women, particularly racialized, low-income, disabled and newcomer women. Strengthening CEPA to better protect women's health — e.g., by reducing toxic exposures in our communities, workplaces, homes and products — will support the feminist recovery agenda. This requires an approach centred on prevention, precaution and intersectionality.

Gender factors increase exposure

- Women are disproportionately exposed to indoor pollution, including chemicals in the air, dust, water, cleaning products, furniture and cosmetics in home environments due to gendered family and social roles.
- Women, including newcomer and racialized women, often work in precarious conditions with built-in toxic exposures e.g., the nearly immediate negative health impacts experienced by nail salon workers soon after they begin work have been well-documented.
- Racialized women are disproportionately exposed to a great number of toxic chemicals through cosmetic products targeted to them, with a growing body of research associating these chemicals to serious negative health outcomes.

¹ When referring to gender, this note uses the term "women" to include all women, trans and cis. When referring to sex differences, we use "biologically male" and "biologically female," while recognizing the limitations of this terminology.

- Levels of toxins in the air are higher in racialized, Indigenous and lower-income communities located near highways or industries.
- Inuit women and children face more significant exposures and corresponding significantly higher body levels of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, chemicals found to weaken immune systems and vaccine effectiveness.
- The unachievable task of avoiding toxic exposures for families is often held by women who do the bulk of household shopping.
- As caregivers, women's lives are impacted by having to deal with the effects of toxic exposures on the health of their children e.g., the 850,000 cases of asthma in children and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in five per cent of school-aged children.

Sex-specific factors increase vulnerability

- Biologically male bodies were considered the norm in research on health problems and a wide range of health norms well into the 21st century. Research in the area of sex-specific impacts of toxic exposures is only starting to catch up. Biologically female bodies are still significantly underrepresented in the scientific literature on chemical assessments and health impacts of toxic exposures.
- Ubiquitous hormone-disrupting chemicals lower fertility and contribute to hormone-sensitive cancers, including breast, uterine and ovarian cancers.
- Biologically female bodies have a unique susceptibility to chemicals as a result of sex-specific differences in biochemical pathways, hormones, metabolism, body fat composition, blood chemistry and the size of body tissues.
- In utero exposures are an absolutely critical window of vulnerability in terms of the impact of toxic exposures on the developing fetus for which people who become pregnant bear the sole burden.

Conclusion

Modernization of CEPA is an opportunity to address sex and gender dimensions of pollution and toxics in Canada. Due to many complex intersecting dynamics, women are not always protected through a standardized approach to health impacts. Furthermore, women's health risks are often framed as lifestyle choices. This focus on personal responsibility excludes involuntary exposures. A stronger legislative framework is needed to protect women against pollution and toxics in our workplaces, neighbourhoods, consumer products, food and the general environment and to support a *healthy* feminist recovery.

Contacts

Jennifer Beeman, Breast Cancer Action Quebec, jennifer.beeman@acsqc.ca

Cassie Barker, Women's Healthy Environment Network, cassie@womenshealthyenvironments.ca

Jane McArthur, CAPE, jane@cape.ca 416-306 2273

Lisa Gue, David Suzuki Foundation, lgue@davidsuzuki.org 613-914-0747

Elaine MacDonald, Ecojustice, emacdonald@ecojustice.ca 416-368-7533 x527

Tim Gray, Environmental Defence, tgray@environmentaldefence.ca, 416-986-2408