

Poster Presentation

14.6 OCCUPATIONAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS VIOLATION IN THE ASBESTOS INDUSTRY IN MEXICO

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This summary of a lengthy project was shown as a poster presentation at Osasco. The poster may be viewed in **PowerPoint** or **PDF** format while the text alone is reproduced below.

Introduction

In Mexico, nonobservance of labor and environmental rights is systemic. This applies to issues of health, safety, hygiene and right of information. This nonobservance is undocumented so we don't know anything about the number of workers involved, or the hazards faced by communities bordering asbestos industry sites. These communities have been, and continue to be, exposed to this carcinogenic fiber since the 70's. All this, means that the exposed population represents a big public health problem with consequences still unknown.

This problem will have serious repercussions, such as the increase of mortality caused by sicknesses originating from asbestos exposure. And it will happen in the next millennium even without any related increase in exposure to this fiber.

Objectives

The principal objective of this study was to document the level of fulfillment of the occupational and environmental asbestos regulations in the industries in Valle de Mexico, evaluate the amount of information which the workers and the communities in the area have about risks, and also what they know about their labor and environmental rights. Later, the workers and the communities will be informed about the risks as well as their rights.

Methodology

For this study, we identified twenty-nine factories in Valle de Mexico employing around 4051 workers, one factory in Pachuca, Hidalgo and another in Guadalajara, Jalisco. For more than 50% of these factories there are working-class neighborhoods and apartment buildings nearby.

The study was carried out in 21 asbestos factories. We supplied questionnaires for documenting the amount of information that the workers have about the risks they are exposed to.

Results

For the 252 workers who answered the questionnaire the average age was 30.5 years. The time working at the factory was 5.6 years. 50% had been working at the factory for less than 3 years, 75% less than 8 years and 90% less than 13 years. 84.5% (213) are men and only 15% (38) are women. 51.1% studied up to secondary school. Only 46% know that they work with asbestos. 51% do not know about the dangers to their health that can be caused if they work with asbestos. 100% do not know anything about health, security and hygiene regulations existing in Mexico.

The results of the pilot survey in a community around an asbestos factory are: 66% were women, the average age was 45.5 years, 22% of these women had studied up to primary school, 28% secondary, and 16% high school. 55.5% of them were married. 72% were from D.F. and the years they had been living in that neighborhood averaged 18. 55% of them were housewives, and 25% worked outside their houses. 83% said that there was a factory near their house. 77% did not know the name of the factory. 61% knew that the factory makes brake pads and car paste. Asked what they thought about having a factory near their houses, 33% said that it was bad and 5% that it was very bad. 100% said that the factory did not tell them about the products made there.

Discussion

The workers are young, with too little information about the risks to their health, or information about their labor rights. They disregard health regulations, safety and hygiene, and have had little time working in the factory. The findings of this study match the results of some other studies carried out in Mexico in two asbestos factories, where the average period the workers had been working was 5 years. This is probably one of the policies of the asbestos manufacturers: changing their labor force every 5 years, in a premeditated way, because they know that the latent period of the illnesses caused by asbestos can be from 5 to 30 years. In addition, the workers do not realize that asbestos could be dangerous for their health, because the effects are not seen immediately.

Something that really surprised me, and that we were not expecting, was that 79% of the workers said that they were satisfied with their jobs. When we asked why, the reason given was as simple as that they had a steady job (in a country with a very high unemployment rate). They also said that these kinds of industries pay more than others, as they pay them 3 times the basic salary in Mexico. Only 24% of them consider their job to be dangerous. It is clear to me that the workers have an enormous necessity to earn money and although their health is not something that they consider valuable, as it is the only thing they have, they have to "sell" it.

Examples of workers who die without their illnesses being recognized as occupational in origin, may be found in a study carried out by the INER, where the files of a number of patients who died as a result of malignant mesothelioma from 1991 to 1998 were re-assessed. It was found that of the 45 studied, 33 (73%) were men, and 12 (26%) were women. Since 80% of the files did not contain any information about the exposure

that the workers had in their jobs, it was not possible to establish a relationship between exposure to asbestos and pleural mesothelioma.

In the community study, the three aspects that the people there considered most dangerous for their health were: the factories being near their houses (55.5%); air pollution because of cars and factories (33%); insecurity (11.5%). 88% said that the owners of the factories should be held responsible for environmental pollution while 50% say it should be the authorities.

Conclusion

The results of this study have wide implications, in that they highlight the general lack of respect for workers' rights in the area of occupational health, safety and hygiene, the very factors that enable dangerous industries to come to Mexico from developed countries. Even though this study focuses on the asbestos industry, the same violation of workers' rights may be taking place in many industries settled in Mexico (petroleum, lead, mill, and refinery industries, etc.). Consequently, this study could have an impact on health regulations and the level of information about health hazards offered to workers and the general population.