

OCCUPATIONAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS VIOLATION IN THE ASBESTOS INDUSTRY IN MEXICO

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BACKGROUND

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.

OBJECTIVE

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 this risk, and what they know about their labor and environmental rights. Communicate the risks as well as their rights.

METHODS

As the first stage of our cross-sectional study, we identified twenty-nine factories in Valle de Mexico employing around 4051 workers. For more than 50% of these factories there are working-class neighborhoods and apartment buildings nearby. Fig. 1

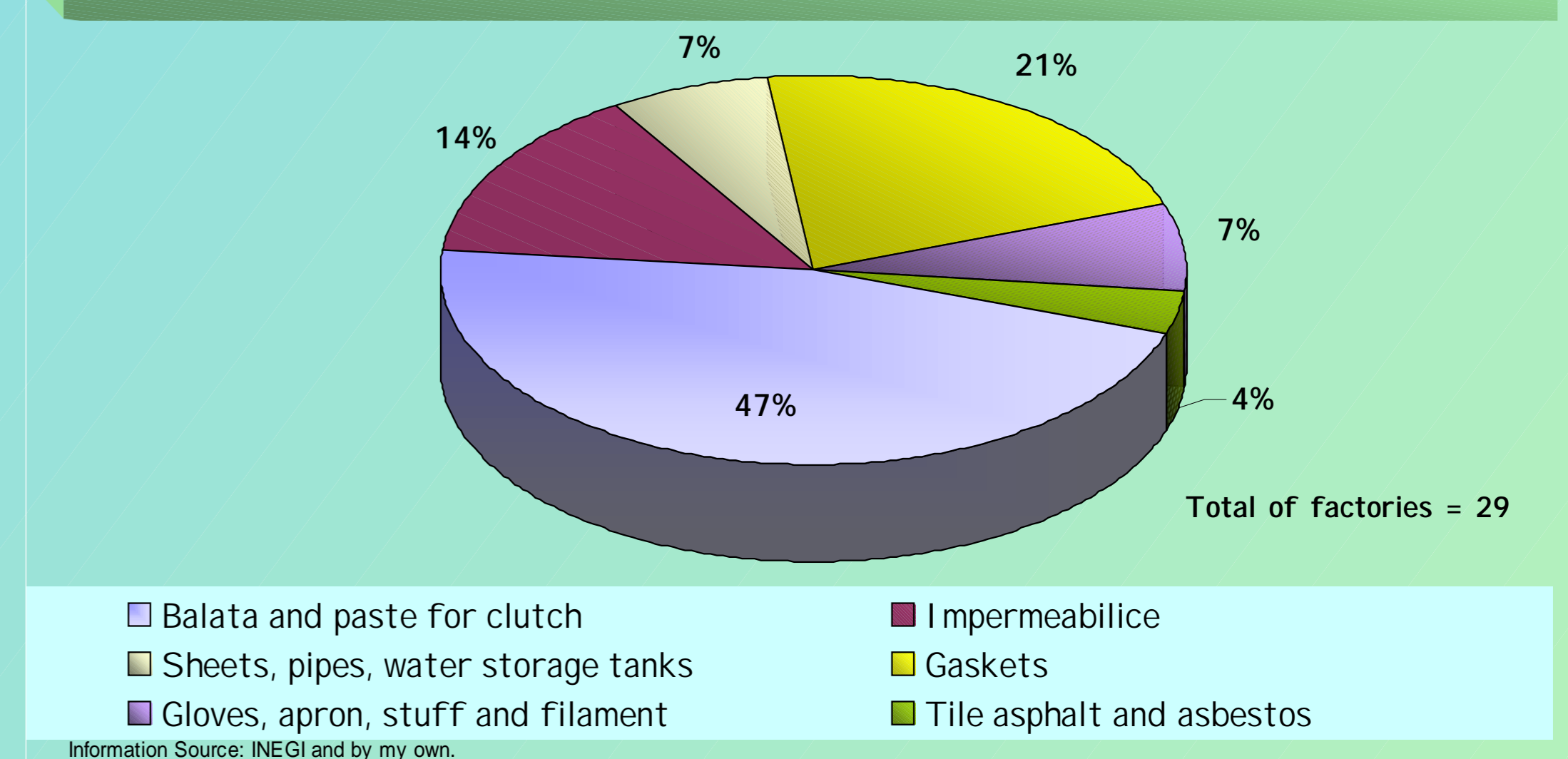
The study was carried out in 21 asbestos factories. We supplied questionnaires for documenting the amount of information that the workers have about the risks they are exposed to.

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) were men and only 15% (38) were women. 51.1% studied up to secondary school. Only 46% knew that they worked with asbestos. 51% did not know about the dangers to their health that can be caused if they work with asbestos. 100% did not know anything about health, safety and hygiene regulations existing in Mexico.

It was found that 47% of the factories that use asbestos produced balata and paste for clutch linings. Fig. 2. In the case of the community around the asbestos factory: 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.

Fig. 2. Percentual distribution of factories that use asbestos and several products Metropolitan Zone of Mexico City. 1999



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.

Table I. Statistics of descriptive variables in study of workers at 21 asbestos plants. Mexico City 1999

Variables	%
Know they work with asbestos	46
Don't know about the health risks of asbestos	51
Know asbestos causes Cancer	40
Producing balatas	54
Are smokers	38.7
Receive the results of medical examinations in writing	39
Wash work clothes at home	56

CONCLUSIONS

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.

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Fig 1. Asbestos Industries in Metropolitan Zone of Mexico City. 1999

