



NATIONAL LATINA INSTITUTE FOR REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Chemical Injustice: the Unequal Burden of Toxic Chemicals on Women of Color and Low-income Families

Toxic chemicals that harm reproductive health are found in many of the products we use every day, from plastic bottles and bath products to couch cushions and blue jeans. However, the harms caused by these toxic products are not shared equally. Low-income women and women of color shoulder far more than their fair share – they are much more likely to be directly exposed to toxic chemicals at work, at home, and through consumer products. Increased exposure to these chemicals means these women are also more likely to experience early puberty, infertility, uterine fibroids, and other reproductive health problems that have been linked to toxic chemicals. Compounding the problem, women of color and low-income women are less likely to have access to health insurance or quality, affordable care to prevent and address health problems that may have environmental causes.

This unfortunate reality underscores the need for comprehensive chemical policy reform. Without common-sense limits on toxic chemicals, relief from environmental hazards in everyday products will be nearly impossible for low-income women and women of color.

At Work

Women of color are disproportionately represented in professions where workplace exposure to toxic chemicals is frequent and severe. In addition, women of color in these professions often work long hours with little to no protection from chemical exposures. These women are also less likely to have information about the risks from their exposure.

- [88%](#) of farmworkers in the United States are Latino. Farmworkers and their families are exposed to pesticides while they work, through the air they breathe, the water they drink, and the food they eat. Pesticide exposure can lead to cancer, miscarriage and birth defects. Further, Pesticides carried home on the clothes of one family member can affect the health of the whole family.
- [40%](#) of nail salon technicians in the United State are Asian Pacific Islanders (API). Toxic chemicals found in nail polishes and nail polish removers are linked to reproductive health issues such as infertility, miscarriage, and cancer.
- A majority of domestic and hospitality workers are women of color and immigrant women. In these industries, workers are regularly exposed to industrial strength cleaning supplies, medical supplies, and other agents with known or possible impacts on reproductive health. Worker exploitation is also pervasive in these industries—making it that much harder for women to seek protection from chemical exposures.

At the Store

For some women, limiting their own and their family's exposure to toxic chemicals through buying "greener" products is simply not an option. Women of color and low-income people are less likely to have the resources to buy the safer, but often more expensive household items and personal care products.

- Products like hair straighteners or hair relaxers are heavily marketed to women of color and contain toxic chemicals. The African American community is the biggest consumer of hair care

products, spending close to [\\$7.8 billion](#) annually. Companies even have a history of [lying](#) to women about the safety of these products.

- Low-income communities and communities where people of color live have [fewer](#) supermarkets of any kind, and “health food” or “natural” markets may be unheard of, leaving people in these neighborhoods with fewer choices when it comes to buying non-toxic products or healthy, chemical free food.

At Home

Women of color and low-income families are more likely to live in neighborhoods with polluted air and water and more likely to live in housing that contains asbestos, lead paint, allergens, and poor ventilation.

- A [majority \(56%\)](#) of people living in neighborhoods within two miles of hazardous waste facilities are people of color.
- [66%](#) of Latinos live in areas where air quality does not meet the federal government’s air quality standards.
- Household [plastics](#), including items like shower curtains and vinyl flooring, have been linked with increases in diabetes, especially among African Americans, Mexican Americans and women living in poverty.

Working Together for Environmental Justice

Fortunately, there is hope for change. The law that currently regulates chemicals, the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA), has not been updated in 36 years and does little to help protect the public’s health from toxic chemicals and even less to protect communities of color and low-income communities who are already disproportionately impacted by exposure to chemicals. The Safe Chemicals Act, which updates TSCA, includes some specific measures that will greatly alleviate the burden of toxic chemicals on communities of color:

- **Require Basic Health & Safety Information for All Chemicals:** Manufacturers should be required to provide basic health and safety information for chemicals, proving those chemicals safe *before* they enter the market, our homes, and our bodies.
- **Protect Reproductive Health from the Worst Chemicals:** Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) should be required to prioritize safety determinations for some of the most dangerous commonly used chemicals, including reproductive toxicants bisphenol A (BPA) and phthalates.
- **Protect Disproportionately Affected/Vulnerable Populations:** Chemicals should be assessed against a health standard that explicitly requires protection of disproportionately vulnerable and affected populations, including infants, children, and adolescents; pregnant women (including effects on fetal development); individuals with preexisting medical conditions; and workers.
- **Ensure Environmental Justice:** Effective reform should contribute substantially to reducing the disproportionate burden of toxic chemical exposure placed on people of color, low-income people, and indigenous communities by requiring the EPA to identify and take action on “hot spots,” areas of the country facing disproportionate toxic chemical burdens and adverse health effects due to a high concentration of industrial activity, a legacy of pollution, or other factors.

Women of color are among the hardest hit by the health effects of unregulated toxic chemicals. However, they are also some of the strongest supporters of common-sense regulations. A 2009 poll found that a [majority](#) of African American voters (72%) and Hispanic voters (86%) favored chemical policy reform. Now, more than ever, women of color and allies must lead the fight to protect our families’ health and future advocating for the passage of chemical policy reform.