

Workers making electronic devices should not be exposed to hazardous chemicals

As much manufacturing of devices such as smartphones and laptops has been outsourced to Southeast Asia, so have many human rights risks in the production process. In the Philippines, workers in the supply chains of well-known brands are exposed to hazardous chemicals and suffer serious health impacts, including cancer and miscarriages, a new Swedwatch report finds.

The health risks connected to the manufacturing of ICT products have been widely known since the 1980s, when it was first reported that Silicon Valley workers suffered serious health effects linked to chemical exposure. Today this manufacturing has been outsourced to countries with weak protection of workers and where the predominantly female workforce suffers similar health problems.

Although these impacts on workers' human rights and health in the ICT manufacturing industry are well-documented, exposure to hazardous chemicals remains a major issue.

In the Swedwatch report [Toxic Tech](#), female factory workers speak of dire working conditions at Filipino factories supplying global markets with components for ICT products. The women work 12-hour shifts, six days a week in poorly ventilated rooms where they handle hazardous chemicals without appropriate protective equipment and safety instructions.

They described working with nothing but thin cloth masks and surgical gloves. Many complained of dizziness, headaches and chest pains caused by fumes. One worker reported that the chemicals were so strong that the gloves she was issued melted on her hands. Workers also described crippling and potentially deadly diseases. According to the research, laws in place to protect the workers from exposure to chemicals, and to allow them to refuse dangerous work, are not enforced.

"If we want to know whether the chemicals are dangerous, the manager asks us if we want the job or not. They say that we applied for the job and should not be complaining," one worker said.

ICT products have long and complex supply chains. Nevertheless, companies sourcing components from the Philippines or selling products to end customers are linked to human rights impacts through their business relationships. The women interviewed said their factories supply components to well-known brands. Swedwatch has accessed customer lists from one factory which confirms this.

"The workers describe horrific effects on their health and the health of their unborn children. For the women interviewed in this study, cancer and miscarriages are so common that they have become the norm. All companies sourcing ICT components and products from the Philippines are linked to these impacts and should act immediately," says Olof Björnsson, report author at Swedwatch.

Swedwatch calls on companies sourcing ICT components and products from the Philippines, and elsewhere, to ensure that workers are not exposed to hazardous chemicals and that their right to be informed of workplace risks is respected. Informing workers about the chemicals, their potential health impacts and necessary safety requirements is crucial to preventing harm.

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