

DOMESTICS' CROSS-CULTURAL NEWS

The Toronto Organization for Domestic Workers' Rights

March 1995



(INTERCEDE)

SPECIAL ISSUE ON THE ENVIRONMENT

Calling household workers and caregivers:

PROTECT YOUR HEALTH, SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT AGAINST TOXIC PRODUCTS AND POLLUTION

Take a look at all the household products that you are using right now and ask yourself this question: Are they safe for you and for the family living in the household?

If not, then those same products may be harmful to you as well as to the environment.

At the beginning of a workshop about the environment, domestic workers and caregivers were asked if they had experienced any reactions to the popular cleaning products they were using in the household.

"Dizziness and nausea, nose or throat irritations and itchy eyes, skin rashes and allergies, short breath and coughing!" - these answers came quickly to them.

It seems clear that many popular cleaning and household products can be hazardous to our health and that we need to learn more about them and their effects on ourselves and on the environment.

Why do we buy those popular cleaners?

There are many reasons why our employers, or we ourselves, choose the popular brands of cleaners we find in the household.

Price is an important factor - low or discounted prices on a product is a powerful incentive to buy it. We choose cleaners because we believe TV and newspaper advertisements praising their performance.

We also rely on our past experience that a certain product is more effective, easier to use, or brings faster results. Recommendations from friends influence our choices, so do testimoni-

als and other persuasive arguments.

Usually, we use the same brands by force of habit. We've just gotten accustomed to them!

But we should be concerned about how safe these products are - to our health and to our planet.

We must all take care of the environment

It's obvious why we must take care of our bodies and promote our health. But it is not often obvious why taking care of the environment is key to taking care of our health.

Women are caregivers of their families and communities. As such, they have an important interest in making sure that the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the food we eat are not poisoned by toxic chemicals and other pollutants.

Women are buyers of consumer goods and as such, they make day-to-day decisions about what products to buy that will preserve or destroy the environment, that will reduce or increase waste, that will prevent or cause environment-related cancers and other diseases.

Domestic workers and caregivers who are paid to do women's work in the home have an interest in keeping their workplace healthy and free of environmental hazards.

To protect the environment - and ourselves - against poisonous or toxic substances, it is important that we educate ourselves and change some of our work-related habits as well as our choice of cleaners and other products.

Safety precautions against chemicals in cleaners etc.

Most household products and cleaners contain chemicals. Chemicals affect people and the environment directly or indirectly and exposure to them can poison the environment and ourselves.

A good safety precaution against chemicals is to minimize as much as possible the amount used and our exposure to them.

Common chemicals that can adversely affect our health are chlorine, dyes, NTA, EDTA, sulfanates, ammonia and enzymes contained in cleaners, brighteners and other products. It is important to read product labels, cautions and directions for use.

Wearing cotton-lined gloves is a practical measure to reduce exposure to chemical substances. When washing by hand, wearing gloves can prevent skin irritation or abrasion.

Fumes or vapours will irritate eyes, nasal passages and lungs so it is important to open windows and ensure ventilation. Do the same when using sprays or aerosols. In fact it's better to use products in cream or liquid form instead of sprays.

Protecting your eyes with glasses or wearing coveralls when working with chemical products are recommended.

Seal products after use and don't transfer them to other containers - this will prevent dangerous mixing of chemicals and keep original product labels that specify content and cautionary instructions.

Store chemical products in safe, dry and cool places, away from children and pets, and if possible under lock and key. Pay attention to storage instructions on product labels.

Empty containers of ordinary household cleaners can be placed in the Blue Box after removing the lids. But stronger chemicals contained in such products as paints and pesticides must be considered hazardous waste and must not be mixed with other household garbage. Have them picked up or find out the nearest hazard-

ous waste depot in your area by calling Household Hazardous Waste Hotline 392-4330.

Knowing about first aid is worthwhile. In case of any accident, call Poison Information 813-5900 or 911 - these numbers are on the first page of the telephone directory under "Emergency Numbers".

Choose better products and alternative cleaners

When choosing household cleaners, convince your employer of the following qualities: non-toxic, non-aerosol, non-corrosive, phosphate-free, all-purpose. Buy inexpensive, reusable products that have minimum packaging.

Alternative cleaners can replace expensive and over-packaged products: vinegar, baking soda, lemon juice, borax, household ammonia, salt, hot water. In combination, you can substitute them for:

dishwashing

- use liquid soap instead of detergents; to cut grease add a little vinegar.
- silverware - leave for 3 minutes in a boiling pan of 1 quart water with 1 tbsp baking soda and 1 tbsp salt, then polish with soft cloth.

laundry

- use biodegradable detergents on full loads or use minimum amount of soap powder instead of detergents. Add 1/2 cup of vinegar in the rinse cycle to soften fabrics.
- Or add 1/3 cup washing soda to the water as the machine is filling. Put clothes in when soda is dissolved. Add 1-1/2 cups of soda powder. If the water is hard, you can add 1/2 cup of vinegar to the first rinse.
- Dirty spots - remove with a paste of washing soda and water. Ball-point pen marks can be soaked in milk and rubbed off. For coffee stains, pour boiling water over fresh stain.
- Bleach - can be replaced with borax.
- Avoid static - by drying until just damp and hanging clothes or put a damp towel in the dryer.

- Starch - by mixing corn-starch with water and sprinkle clothes before ironing.

Oven-cleaning

- Catch drips with a tray or liner. Remove grease with paste of baking soda and water.
- Spills should be cleaned immediately. For large spills, sprinkle oven with salt immediately, then brush off and wipe oven when cool.

Drains

- Every week pour boiling water or 1/2 cup of baking soda followed by 1/2 cup of vinegar and a palmful of salt to prevent clogging. If clogged, flush drain with hot water and 1/2 cup washing soda then flush again. Or use plunger or plumber's snake.

Windows, Glass

- Wash with soap and water then rinse with equal parts of vinegar and water.

Furniture

- To polish furniture, use soft cloth and mayonnaise. Or mix one part lemon juice with 2 parts vegetable oil and rub with soft cloth. Or use mineral oil on a damp cloth.

Chrome

- Clean chrome with soft cloth and rubbing alcohol. Or dry baking soda on a dry cloth can do the job.

Carpets

- To clean and deodorize, sprinkle baking soda and after an hour, vacuum. Or mix 2 cups of cornmeal

and 1 cup borax, sprinkle over carpet and vacuum after an hour. Repeat blotting severe stains with vinegar in soapy water.

Cooking odors

- Simmer orange peels and small clove or stick of cinnamon in small quantity of water.

Air fresheners

- Use fresh flowers or dried flowers and herbs.

All-purpose cleaners

- Mix 3 tbsp of baking soda with one quart water. Or in 2 litres of water, combine 125 ml of ammonia, 125 ml of vinegar and 65 ml of baking soda.

Disinfectant

- combine 250 ml of borax for every 4 litres of water.

Pesticides

- Equal parts of baking soda and sugar. Sprinkle borax under baseboards and refrigerator but keep this out of children's reach as borax is moderately toxic.

Baking and washing soda, borax, and vinegar may be alternatives to chemical cleaners but they may still be hazardous to health and cause

VANCOUVER CDWCR
 Committee for Domestic Workers' &
 Caregivers' Rights
(an INTERCEDE Affiliate)
 Contact Julie or Lorina (604) 874-0649

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irritation of eyes and skin. So moderation in their use is still a good rule.

Health precautions

Emotional and physical stresses are health hazards common to women who work in the home workplace.

It is important to avoid lifting heavy things, standing too long, repeating the same movements for prolonged periods or working in uncomfortable positions.

And it is important to learn to manage stress by insisting on your rest periods, doing simple things you enjoy and that relax your mind such as taking a stroll, going out with friends, seeing a movie, crocheting, etc.. But most important of all is changing government and social policies that create stressful and health threatening work and life conditions for these women workers.

Reduce, re-use and recycle

Each of us can contribute a share in reducing waste of energy - turn off the light, lower the heating, cook efficiently, waste less water.

We can contribute our share to reducing garbage, re-using and recycling instead of just throwing unwanted items into a plastic bag and throwing.

Because we are interested in our health and the health of the planet, we must continue to edu-

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cate ourselves about what are the things we can each do in order to preserve this planet and keep it clean and safe today and tomorrow.

(References for this article are: Nita Choudhuri, Environmental Health Promoter of the South Riverdale Community Health Centre; Women and the Environment (Ontario Advisory Council on Women's Issues); Common Ground Magazine; Guide to Waste Reduction in Metropolitan Toronto (Metroworks))

Useful Numbers

Nita Choudhuri, Environment Health Promoter, Tel. 469-3917, South Riverdale Community Health Centre

Metro Works, Tel. 392-4546
Ask for the latest copy of "Your Guide to Waste Reduction and Recycling in Metro Toronto"

Greensaver, Tel. 461-9670
publishes "Non-Toxic Cleaning Recipes"

INTERCEDE SERVICE UNIT

We serve live-in or live-out domestic and caregiver workers, in hospitals or senior homes, on temporary or open work permits, immigrants or citizens. Our services include information and education, counselling, referrals, liaison and advocacy in the areas of immigration, sponsorship & citizenship, labour laws, human rights, health and safety, sexual assault, family reunification, etc. Please call for appointment.

Place: 234 Eglinton Ave. E., Suite 205,
Toronto, Ont. M4P 1K5
Time: Monday-Friday, 9 am - 4 pm
Tel: (416) 483-4554 Fax: (416) 483-9781

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c/o INTERCEDE

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FIRST CLASS

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

ORIENTATION MEETING FOR DOMESTIC/LIVE-IN CAREGIVER WORKERS
Sunday, April 23, 1995, 12:30 to 5:00 p.m.

2 pm Child Abuse by Nyron Sookraj,
Manager, Catholic Children's Aid Society

3 pm Updates on Immigration Sponsorship
by Flemingdon Community Legal Services

CARIBBEAN GROUP MEETING
Sunday, April 23, 1995, 3:00 to 5:00 p.m.

3 pm Immigration Sponsorship

Above meetings at:

George Brown College, St. James Campus
200 King Street East, Room 350-E

Next Monthly Meeting Sunday, May 7, 1995
3 to 5 pm Cecil Community Center

Topics:

- OHIP Updates
 - Health, Environment and Legal Protection
- By: Nita Chaudhuri, Environmental Health Promoter
South Riverdale Community Health Center

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