Women and the Tobacco Industry

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Gender-specific risks of tobacco products

1. 200 million of the world’s one billion smokers are women.¹

2. 2 million women die from tobacco use every year. Of the 8.71 million annual tobacco deaths, 2.15 million are women (2019),² 71% of whom live in low- and middle-income countries.³

3. 600,000 women fall victim to second-hand smoke (SHS) every year. 64% of annual SHS-related deaths are women.⁴,⁵

4. Smoking results in additional risks to women’s reproductive health. In addition to the increased risk of stroke, heart and lung diseases, and cancers,⁶,⁷,⁸ women can suffer reproductive health problems such as increased risk of infertility and delays in conceiving,⁹,¹⁰ increased risk of cervical cancer¹¹,¹² and increased risks of premature delivery, stillbirth and newborn death if they smoke during pregnancy.¹³,¹⁴

5. Smoking increases the likelihood of falling into poverty, which fuels domestic violence, especially against women.¹⁵ The addictive nature of tobacco use crowds out other more productive household spending, such as purchasing food, education, housing, holidays and more.¹⁶,¹⁷,¹⁸ When household resources are scarce, conflict in household decision-making and gender imbalance in decision-making can more easily arise.¹⁹

6. Women laborers in the tobacco sector are disproportionately affected by the negative environmental, health and social impacts of handling tobacco.²⁰

- Women make up nearly 50% of the agriculture labor force in low-income countries.²¹
- There is substantial involvement of women in the tobacco labor force, especially in the unorganized and home-based tobacco industry.²² Women constitute 94% of workers in the kretek hand-rolling factories in Indonesia, while the bidi industry in India employs twice as many women as men.²³
The role of the tobacco industry

01 The tobacco industry targets women with its marketing campaigns, often marketing to women...through women.

Since the 1960s, the tobacco industry has geared richly-funded marketing campaigns towards women through advertisements that draw on gender stereotypes and falsely link tobacco use to concepts of beauty, slimness, sophistication, prestige, emancipation, freedom, romance and sexual allure. Even today, tobacco companies use the same strategies to market their products, including new ones, on all platforms available including social media through women influencers.

- In 2021, Japan Tobacco International’s (JTI) sponsorship of the volleyball World Cup and of the JT Marvelous women’s team in Japan’s national volleyball league were scrutinized, endangering Japan’s bid for the Olympics 2020. Notably, Marvel is a cigarette brand acquired by JTI in the Philippines in 2017.

- In 2018, Philip Morris International (PMI)/Altria funded the Independent Women’s Forum (IWF), a U.S.-based women’s think tank, which promoted PMI’s new tobacco product, IQOS, a heated tobacco product that has not been proven to reduce harm compared to combustible cigarettes. Nevertheless, they are marketed as “less harmful,” not “harmless,” a strategy fraught with dangers of youth uptake, unproven long-term impact, and potential to mislead (akin to the “light/mild” cigarettes).

02 The tobacco industry uses the sponsorship of women-related initiatives to obscure how its products uniquely harm and kill women.

Every year tobacco companies “celebrate” International Women’s Day with a promise of gender equality and equity, but ignore the tens of millions of women harmed by their products and business practices.

- PMI and British American Tobacco (BAT) invest heavily in advertising its efforts on equity in executive compensation and women empowerment/leadership programs. Meanwhile, the companies obscure information regarding the increasing smoking prevalence and deaths among women, especially in low- and middle-income countries, and make it difficult for women to seek justice for their deceptive, targeted marketing, and the addiction and diseases it causes.

- A 2018 report revealed that PMI’s public relations campaigns on “Empowering Women” was rolled out in about 30 countries, of which a majority are low- and middle-income ones, where a significant increase in women smoking has been observed.
03 Tobacco companies benefit from the poor working conditions women suffer on tobacco farms, while touting gender equity in labor practices.51

Tobacco companies are found to be “addicted” to cheap inputs (low-priced raw materials) which perpetuates poor working conditions on tobacco farms52 where nearly half of laborers are women.53 Yet, they have avoided scrutiny over the need to compensate not only the millions54 of female victims of tobacco, but also the thousands laboring under harsh conditions on tobacco farms.55, 56, 57

- Transnational tobacco companies used public relations campaigns to show how they are practicing gender equity in compensating its estimated 60,000 female employees,58, 59, 60 even citing the sustainable development goals (SDGs),61 but with no mention of their accountability for the harms their products cause women.

- Tobacco companies are known to sponsor programs on livelihood for women to cleanse its image.62

04 Transnational tobacco companies deny compensation to the millions of women who fall victim to tobacco use, but paid at least USD $1 billion in marketing efforts that put more women in harm’s way.63

U.S. lawsuits filed in the 1980s and ‘90s by victims have dragged on for decades and remain pending with tobacco companies seeking to avoid payment.64 Although tobacco companies compensated a small number of women (mostly flight attendants,65 a majority of whom are women, for exposure to SHS), many women across the world who are similarly situated are not empowered to seek justice. Further, money that could have been used to compensate women for tobacco-related harms66 is instead used for public relations and marketing, including those targeting women:

- In 2021, BAT invested GBP £1 billion in promoting its novel addictive products on TikTok,67 where 60% of users are women.68

- In 2017, PMI funded Foundation for a Smoke-Free World (FSFW) with a USD $1 billion commitment, a small part of which funds women’s initiatives (e.g. in India, Malawi, the U.S. and New Zealand).69, 70, 71 Evidence revealed by an insider suggests that FSFW “actually works to advance PMI’s and Altria’s goals”,72 which involves increasing brand value and sales including through so-called “socially responsible” activities. In 2020, FSFW73, 74 awarded small grants for research including for women bidi rollers in India.75
How the tobacco industry’s so-called CSR hinders SDG 5 (Gender Equality)

As part of their so-called corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, tobacco companies sponsor women’s initiatives to launder their image and lobby policymakers to undermine tobacco control policies that protect women—with the aim of increasing both sales and profits from its deadly and addictive products. In recent years, the tobacco industry proclaims that its sponsorship of women’s programs are efforts to further the SDGs. This is misleading.

How does the tobacco industry interfere with the SDG of empowering women and promoting gender equality?

- Continuously selling and marketing products that kill over 2 million women annually, as well as introducing addictive products with unknown long-term impact on women.
- Failing to protect women from and compensate women for the gender-specific health risks from tobacco, such as the disproportionate burden of exposure to SHS and use during pregnancy.
- Diverting attention from the plight of women laborers, as well as those who use tobacco products or are exposed to it, by shifting attention to its own corporate gender policies.
- Engaging in women’s empowerment programs and sponsoring women’s initiatives as a means to increase brand value, rehabilitate its image, and/or to engage with policymakers and influential persons, while watering down tobacco control measures that protect women.
- Aligning itself with prominent women’s groups or personalities to gain legitimacy and credibility for its own so-called CSR. This includes instances when tobacco executives appear in the same line-up as prominent gender experts.
- Funding women’s groups that lobby or speak in favor of its deadly, addictive products.
- Causing or allowing the exposure or publication of its sponsorship activities/contributions through women’s activities or forums, which may undermine CSR bans that exist in over 63 countries.

Instead of investing in so-called CSR, the tobacco industry should:

- Stop marketing its products to women and cease portraying tobacco companies as beneficial to society, which helps tobacco companies market their products.
- Stop countering efforts to exact payments from tobacco including taxes, fees and surcharges that would redound to the benefit of victims or their health care. Compensate victims for harms caused by tobacco use.
- Stop countering life-saving tobacco control measures such as comprehensive tobacco advertising and sponsorship bans.
- Stop so-called CSR activities, as they can provide opportunities to engage with policymakers and effectively undermine the government’s duty to protect public health policy from the commercial and vested interests of the tobacco industry under Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.
- Article 5.3 Guidelines recommend the denormalization, including denouncement, of so-called CSR.
Article 13 mandates a comprehensive ban on all tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship, which includes so-called CSR activities or the publication of the same. Governments should not allow exceptions even in the case of disasters (e.g. Vietnam) or under a regime of mandatory CSR such as in India, and, potentially, in the Philippines.

Stop publicising so-called CSR relating to gender as this results in furthering the misconceptions about the true role of the tobacco industry as a gross violator of women’s rights to health and to compensation/means of redress.

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9. The Danish Institute for Human Rights. 4 May 2017. Human rights assessment in Philip Morris International. Available from: https://www.humanrights.dk/news/human-rights-assessment-philip-morris-international (accessed 2 March 2021). “Tobacco is deeply harmful to human health, and there can be no doubt that the production and marketing of tobacco is irreconcilable with the human right to health. For the tobacco industry, the UNGPs therefore require the cessation of the production and marketing of tobacco.”

ANNEX. The Tobacco Industry’s Marketing to Women in Pictures

**BOX 7. TOBACCO INDUSTRY MARKETING: SAME TACTICS, NEW PRODUCTS**

Evidence shows how tobacco companies have targeted young women with its cigarette advertisements from the 1970s to 1990s. E-cigarette advertisements now look much like the cigarette advertisement of the past.

Image Source: Box 7 (Events marketing by tobacco companies for the youth). In: Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control (GGTC). 26 May 2020. Tobacco industry: Manipulating the youth into a lifelong addiction.

More women than men smoke "light" cigarettes (63% versus 46%), often under the mistaken belief that "light" means "safer."1 In fact, "light" smokers often engage in compensatory smoking, inhaling more deeply and more frequently to absorb the desired amount of nicotine.101 Women’s penchant for “safer” products suggests that they are a strong target market for novel products that tobacco companies market as “safer,” such as heated tobacco products or e-cigarettes. The gender-specific marketing for cigarette brands like Virginia Slims in the 1990s are replicated in the marketing of the new products IQOS, Blu, glo or Vype.


Tobacco companies market a variety of cigarette brands to girls and women, including “female-only” brands that are long, extra-slim, low-tar, light-colored, mentholated and/or candy-flavored.‡ In 2005, JTI contributed to a systematic campaign, run by major tobacco companies, to promote tobacco use among women. For example, JTI launched the Glamour cigarettes that target women in a number of countries.102

‡ "Feminizing" of tobacco products can also been seen in low and middle income countries. In Bangladesh, zarda and gul (forms of smokeless tobacco products) are given very attractive female names, such as Shahzadi (Princess), Shobha (beautiful), shurovhi (fragrance, sweet smell), to attract women to the products.8
COVID-19 also provided a unique marketing opportunity for tobacco companies. In 2020, BAT promoted its product *glo* using women keeping fit and safe (in quarantine) using masks featuring the e-cigarette brand name. BAT reportedly invested **GBP 1 billion** to promote its new products in digital media including the use of influencers. Notably, the tobacco companies were found to be behind the spread of misinformation about how nicotine protects against COVID-19,\textsuperscript{103, 104, 105} confounding the fact that smoking worsens outcomes for those afflicted with COVID-19 and vaping has been found to increase risks for developing COVID-19.\textsuperscript{106, 107, 108, 109}

Other promotional activities targeting women include: mass media advertising and sponsorship of cultural and sporting events; point-of-sale promotional material in shops and kiosks; free distribution of tobacco products; brand-stretching (i.e. marketing of other products such as clothing under tobacco brand names); internet promotions; price and pack designs that appeal especially to women and girls; and funding of women’s groups and charities.\textsuperscript{110}


5. World Health Organization. 2019. Background report for the technical meeting to promote an exchange of views on the further development and implementation of the integrated strategy to address decent work deficits in the tobacco sector. Available from: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---dgreports/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_1709898.pdf (accessed 26 February 2021). – According to International Labour Organization (ILO), in about 2019, about 49 million workers are employed in tobacco-growing and processing, located primarily in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Brazil, and the US.

