Panel ABSTRACT

Panel 14: Forever Chemicals and Reproductive Health: Anthropological Perspectives on Inequities, Alternatives, and Policy Dialogs

Organizer: Pratyusha Kiran

Abstract: The pervasive presence of “forever chemicals” (e.g., PFAS, BPA, and phthalates) in our environment poses a profound threat to reproductive health. From endocrine disruption to infertility and pregnancy complications, these chemicals have far-reaching impacts. This panel examines the intersections of medical anthropology, environmental toxicity, and reproductive health, calling for papers that address how forever chemicals disproportionately affect vulnerable populations and illuminate pathways for systemic change.

We invite discussions on the unequal burden of exposure, emphasizing how socioeconomic status, race, gender, and geography shape health outcomes. How do these toxins perpetuate inequities, particularly among marginalized communities with limited access to safe products or healthcare? What systemic and structural forces exacerbate these disparities? Additionally, the panel seeks contributions on sustainable alternatives, policy frameworks, and grassroots advocacy aimed at reducing exposure and ensuring equitable health protections. The panel also welcomes discussions that explore the complex intersections of health and chemical exposure in the Global South.

By exploring the biological, social, and political dimensions of forever chemicals, this panel aims to foster interdisciplinary conversations about their reproductive health impacts and envision actionable solutions for a healthier and more equitable future.

SESSION SCHEDULE

17.09.2025 | Slot 1| 4-0-6

Eleonora Bechis, Giovanni Lorenzi, Stefano Avanzi: Negotiating Environmental Harm: A Comparative Ethnography of PFAS-Affected Communities in Piemont, Veneto and the Lyon region

Edmée Ballif: Toxic reproduction: Preventing endocrine disruption in an unequal world

Marie de Lutz: Materialities of menstrual health: menstrual technologies, toxicants, and sex hormones in the Women of the Sea surf club

SESSION PAPERS

Negotiating Environmental Harm: A Comparative Ethnography of PFAS-Affected Communities in Piemont, Veneto and the Lyon region

Eleonora Bechis, Giovanni Lorenzi, Stefano Avanzi

This contribution begins with a general analysis of PFAS contamination, offering a framework for the examination of three distinct cases of environmental conflict in sites identified as European PFAS pollution hotspots. Through ethnographic inquiry and anthropological analysis, the study focuses on the Piedmont and Veneto regions in Italy, and the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region in France.
The analysis then turns to internal divisions and experiences of isolation within affected communities. Particular attention is given to the small-scale farming sector struggle and the conflicts within the impacted communities in the Veneto region; the coercive trade-off between employment and health in the industrial sector in Piedmont—where workers often face the dilemma of choosing between job security and exposure to harmful substances—and the broader socio-economic repercussions in a context where collective mobilizations remain fragmented and struggle to achieve effectiveness; and grassroots activism in Lyon's "Chemical Valley," which actively challenges institutional narratives and advocates for participatory approaches to environmental governance. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted across these territories, the contribution critically reflects on the differentiated manifestations of environmental violence, emphasizing how its forms and intensities are shaped by specific social, political, and ecological configurations.

Toxic reproduction: Preventing endocrine disruption in an unequal world

Edmée Ballif

As defined by a collective of American feminists of colour (SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, 2006), the concept of reproductive justice is based on the right not to have children, the right to have children, and the right to raise children in safe, healthy, and dignified conditions. This last aspect raises scientific, political, and ethical questions: how are "good" conditions for raising children defined? And which children have the privilege of growing up in such conditions? In this contribution, I explore how environmental health programmes reproduce reproductive injustices. Drawing on my recent research on various public health policies in Switzerland, I critically interrogate how prevention of exposure to toxicity is applied in a context where exposure is not equally distributed. Several Swiss cities have recently launched strategies to prevent children's exposure to endocrine disruptors. The advice given to parents emphasizes the figure of the "good" parent as a responsible consumer, and the "unpolluted" child as an

ideal to be achieved. These programs tend to be blind to social inequalities and their intersections (class, race, gender), which make these ideals difficult to attain for some parents. Through this analysis, I show how public health policies are a matter of reproductive justice: by prescribing how children should be raised, they become a site where social hierarchies are reproduced.

Materialities of menstrual health: menstrual technologies, toxicants, and sex hormones in the Women of the Sea surf club

Marie de Lutz

In a small fishing community on the Caribbean coast of Colombia, Dorkas, a community leader focused on socioenvironmental education, calls on Sua, a menstrual entrepreneur from the capital. Dorkas is searching for someone to donate menstrual cups to the teenagers in her 'Women of the Sea' surf club, a program directed towards girls that challenges gendered norms in relation to the sea. Initially, the cup is a logistical convenience. But as Dorkas weaves it into her program, the object exceeds itself, becoming a central node in the psychosocial component of her curriculum. After a year of preparation, Sua introduces the cup and reusable menstrual pads during a menstrual education workshop. Here, the "forever chemical", the sex hormone, and the disposable and reusable menstrual management technology (d/rMMT), are brought together to materialize the permeability of toxic harm across human and nonhuman bodies, opening a space for reaffirming life-sustaining practices of being, knowing, and doing, core to Dorkas' methodology. This paper will discuss how Dorkas and Sua draw on the materiality of d/rMMTs to lay the groundwork for a technoscientific counterconduct (Murphy 2012) that enables a reconsideration of structures of power, and of relations of bodies (human and nonhuman) to biomedicine, industry, capital, and to each other. Woven into Dorkas' territorial approach to community development, this rereading of toxic flows generates a space for community dialogue on, and responses to, the complex intersections of health, chemical exposure, socioeconomic marginalization, and socioenvironmental care.