

News/ India**Paying with their health****Women in the fish processing sector in India suffer from various health problems**

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Several thousand women in India work under unsanitary and freezing conditions in the country's fishing industry towards preserving the slice and shell marine products. The National Institute of Occupational Health (NIOH) based in Ahmedabad conducted a study that reveals that many among these women age prematurely.

“Women working in fish processing units are predominantly from other states. In Kerala, you would find women from Tamil Nadu, Gujarat or Andhra Pradesh working as contract labour. The same is the case in other states,” said Pranab Kumar Nag, NIOH Deputy Director. “The promise of a regular job lures these women away from their states and they find themselves paying with their health as they have to live and work on the premises for 13 to 14 hours every day,” Nag said on the sidelines of the 93rd Indian Science Congress.

Handling all sorts of tasks from slicing, shelling to hardening and processing a variety of marine products, including squids and seaweed, these women soon become prone to all sorts of health problems. The problems range from back pain and protein related asthma to Raynaud's Phenomenon, a disorder that affects the blood vessels in the fingers, toes, ears and nose.

Though more common in people who live in colder climates, a sample survey found that almost a third of the 800,000 to 900,000 women working in the industry fall prey to Raynaud's Phenomenon. “Raynaud's Phenomenon leads to permanent damage to the skin and in some cases the tip of the bone starts showing. In many of the cases, they suffer from back pain though they are just 18 to 25 years old. After just two years of working, many complain of some health problem,” said Nag. This is mainly due to the long hours the women, who don't even have proper clothing, work in temperatures as low as -12 to -14 degrees Celsius required for preserving the fish.

Studies mainly in Kerala and Gujarat have revealed that the working life of most workers is very short, with hardly anyone above 30 years. Extensive studies are also planned in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Orissa and Maharashtra as a part of the problem identification activity.

“We are also proposing different kinds of remedial action, including change of work conditions and methods of handling fish through scientific intervention,” said Nag. The institute, which studies the impact of various occupations and living environments on health, is also looking into various kinds of gloves and other handling material that could provide protection to the women workers.

Affiliated to the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), studies by NIOH have revealed that the fish processing units lack regulation, as they do not come under the purview of industrial regulations. So, not much can be done about working conditions or the long hours the women have to put in for low wages.