

Child labour rampant in seafood units: police

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'Rescue of 43 girls in West Kochi raid points to larger malaise in industry'

Last week, a joint team of police from Odisha and West Kochi rescued 43 girls from a sea food processing company in West Kochi.

The initiative, as part of "Operation Muskaan", a drive to trace missing children, followed reports that minor girls from Odisha were being trafficked to Kerala. An age determination test of the rescued labourers later confirmed that 26 of them were aged below 18. It is a pointer to a larger malaise that has plagued a major part of the seafood processing sector in Kerala, authorities say.

A raid at the units functioning in and around West Kochi is bound to bring out more cases of child labour and human trafficking, according to K.V. Vijayan, Assistant Commissioner of Police, Mattancherry. "Given the huge volume of migrant women workforce in the sector, it is not a practical option to conduct raids and verify their age and other details," he said.

Officials with the Child Welfare Committee in the district held that it was high time that someone took up this issue with the State government.

"The CWC, however, is unable to interfere in the absence of specific complaints," said a top functionary of the agency.

According to sources in the industry, there are around 75 seafood processing units functioning in the Cherthala-West Kochi belt, which together employ about 4,000 women from States including Odisha, Assam, Bengal and Karnataka. Employed mainly in the stuffing and packaging section, their average monthly salary, including all benefits, is around Rs.7,000.

"Only local women are employed as skilled labourers in the peeling section and their daily income is as high as Rs.700. For all other activities, the sector is dependent on women workforce from other States and we have no options to verify their age and other whereabouts except for the documents provided by the labour contractors," admitted a seafood exporter in Kochi.

Noby Karikkassery, president of the Seafood Exporters' Association of India (Kerala Region), maintained that the association did not interfere in the business of individual companies. "Each member company should be aware of the statutory regulations with regard to deploying migrant labourers and the association generally makes no interventions in these areas. We will step in only in issues that affect this sector as a whole," he said.

