

Rising temperatures hit Indian women's health, income: Report

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Mumbai: Women in India are increasingly feeling the strain of rising temperatures—physically, mentally, and economically. A new report from the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation, 'The Impact of Heat on the Health of Women in India: A Cross-Sectional Study', quantifies these effects through a survey of more than 3,300 women across 15 districts in seven heat-prone states—Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh. The study examines how extreme heat is shaping women's physical, reproductive, and mental health, as well as their livelihoods.

It found, for instance, that 70% of surveyed women experienced physical symptoms—fatigue, dizziness, dehydration, and gastrointestinal discomfort—during peak heat months, while 66% reported mental health impacts such as anxiety, irritability, and disrupted sleep. These effects were intensified by stressors such as crowded living conditions, frequent power outages, and the daily burden of unpaid domestic labour.

The study also found that the prevalence of underweight women was noticeably higher in districts with a high Heat Vulnerability Index (HVI)—over 20%, compared with 14% in low-HVI districts, suggesting a link between climate vulnerability and chronic undernutrition among women.

Over half the women surveyed (51%) reported reproductive health issues, including urinary tract infections and menstrual cycle disruptions, with rural women in high-HVI districts affected at higher rates (55%) than their urban counterparts.

Predictably, poorer women



File pic

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were more severely affected, with 62% of low-income households in high-HVI districts reporting symptoms, compared with 29% of wealthier households—highlighting stark differences in adaptive capacity. A similar disparity appeared across types of work, 83% of informal workers reported heat-related illnesses, compared to 67% of women in formal employment. "Overall, working women reported heat-related health symptoms at rates 13 percentage points higher than their non-working counterparts," the report stated.

Heat stress doesn't just cost women their health, but their income as well. Constrained by the hours they could work in peak heat and the type of work they could take up, majority of the women surveyed (97%) reported wage losses of more than Rs 1,500 in summer months (April-June), while the annual income of women-led households shrank by 8% compared to men.

Reduced earnings were compounded by an additional outlay on water, electricity, food and medical care, adding to their economic burden—as high as Rs. 5,000-10,000 a month, reported 38% of respondents from the low-wealth index.

Heat also impacted the quality of work, as 59.4% of re-

spondents with high heat vulnerability said it hampered interpersonal relations at the workplace, an impact observed by only 16.1% of women from low levels of heat vulnerability.

"Among the most striking findings of the study was how deeply heat affects women in ways that are rarely captured in routine data," says Dr. Soumya Swaminathan Chairperson, M S Swaminathan Research Foundation.

"The study found that psychosocial impacts are profound, with heat stress linked to heightened anxiety, sleep disruption, and a significant increase in household conflict and gender-based violence, particularly in high-vulnerability areas. While many Heat Action Plans (HAPs) exist across India, their implementation is weak and they fail to address the nuanced realities of women's lives," she added.

The report outlines a roadmap for policy reform and gender-responsive heat action. It recommends reframing heat as a long-term public health and development priority rather than treating it solely as a disaster-response issue.

The report further calls for strengthening India's primary healthcare system to improve both prevention and treatment of heat-related ailments.