

## **Primitive means but high commitment to make iodized salt available**

By Nasih Othman

Senior Communication Assistant, Unicef Northern Iraq

Situated in the western entrance of Suleimaniyah city, Bazian Salt Factory, the sole salt iodization factory in the governorate, resembles any thing but a modern industrial firm. In the huge 5000-square meter flat basement, one can only see piles of raw salt, a small simple electrical mill and tens of workers sitting on the ground filling the small half-kg bags with white iodized salt pouring down from the outlet of the mill. A primitive locally made sealing machine without rollers allows the workers to seal the filled salt bags one by one.

“ Our daily production is around 8 tons, which I think covers the needs of Suleimaniyah population for table salt,” said Ms Shaho Ahmed, production manager.

Around 65 staff, 15 in the administrative section and 50 in the production section are working. More than 60% of these staff are women; only in the production section there are 35 women.

Owned by the regional Ministry of Industry, the factory was founded in 1996. UNICEF provided a dosing equipment which adds measured liquid iodine to the salt. Being a mountainous area, iodine content of the soil is low causing iodine deficiency disorders in the region manifested mainly by high prevalence of goiter especially among women.

“ We test the salt three times a day with a dropper to ensure that it is properly iodized,” said Shaho showing us how the color of the white salt changes to purple by pouring over it a drop of the liquid from the dropper. This test kit and the raw material for iodization of the salt, potassium iodate, is procured by UNICEF and provided to the salt factory through the department of health.

Nuhksha Hassan has been working in the factory since 1996. “ You see the factory facilities, it’s hardly changed,” she said, “but the number of workers and the quantity of salt we produce has increased.” And it is understandable since everything is done manually here; men with spades throwing salt into the mill, women sitting on the ground packing the bags, and others sealing them.

Nuhksha recalls that 4 years ago it was not that easy to sell this much salt as today. “ Now people know more about the dangers of using non-iodized salt, they know that it causes a swelling in the neck.” She said.

“ Some neighbors ask me to buy salt for them from the factory because it is cheaper here. I do that. I also try to encourage my neighbors and relatives to use this salt.” Nuhksha originally liked to become a teacher but she couldn’t go beyond 7<sup>th</sup> grade. “ I never thought of working in a salt factory,” she reflected, “ but now I am used to it and I like it.”

The huge hall lacks proper accommodation. It is cold in winter and hot in summer. This affects health of the workers. “ I have asthma, “ said a female worker, Chopi , “ and this

makes me unhappy here. It is not only the cold but also the salt dust which affects us.” The workers are provided with a simple cloth mask to protect them from inhalation of salt dust.

Peri Omar, the factory administrator, acknowledges that there are problems of accommodation, and modernization. But in the present economic circumstances it is not easy to address these things. However they have managed to address other issues like transportation and feeding of the workers and other administrative issues like leave, promotion, and financial support. Women are entitled to a maternity leave of one year; 6 months with full salary and 6 months with half salary.

There were several college graduates among the male workers, not an unusual thing with the high rate of unemployment in the region. Though they receive education entitlements, still they lack the job satisfaction.

As Northern Iraq is a mountainous area, Iodine deficiency disorders have been diagnosed as one of the problems affecting people in the three governorates and goiter is endemic in parts of the region.

Since 1996 UNICEF has been involved in supporting local authorities to establish salt iodination plants and accordingly three plants, one in each governorate, were established. UNICEF continues to provide necessary potassium iodate for these plants. According to a recent survey results there is progressive increase in number of households using iodized salt. Now more than 92% of the population is using iodised salt.

2001