



Working women too dream of good childcare

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(Mains GS 1 & 2 : Role of women and women’s organisations, population and associated issues, poverty and developmental issues, urbanisation, their problems and remedies & Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources)

Context:

The theme for International Women’s Day 2022 is ‘gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow’, however, gender equality is still a far cry for India’s female informal workforce.

Employment gap:

- The **COVID-19 pandemic** has destroyed millions of livelihoods and led to a sudden and large increase in poverty and a massive disruption of the labour market in India.
- The gender employment gap was large and only 18% of working-age women were employed as compared to 75% of men and reasons include a lack of good jobs, restrictive social norms, and the burden of household work.
- Data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy Pvt. Ltd. show that 61% of male workers were unaffected during the lockdown while only 19% of women experienced this kind of security.

Informality of work:

- According to a 2018 study by the International Labour Organization (ILO), more than 95% of India's working women are informal workers who work in labour-intensive, low-paying, highly precarious jobs/conditions, and with no social protection.
- A World Health Organization bulletin says that "women's informal work is central to the feminisation of poverty".
- Another ILO study, in 2016, pointed out that a lack of access to quality childcare services forces women workers to leave the labour force, ceasing their earning, and exposing themselves to discriminatory employment practices, and to significant economic and health risks.

Maternal health benefits:

- India is ahead of many advanced nations in instituting maternal health benefits, and its statutory maternity leave is among the global top three.
- The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 more than doubled the duration of paid maternity leave for women employees to 26 weeks, proposing an option to work from home after this period, on mutual agreement with the employer, and made crèche facilities mandatory for establishments employing 50 or more women.
- However, these benefits are mostly enjoyed by formal sector women workers, constituting less than 5% of the women workforce.
- India has paid less attention to addressing concerns around childcare support for informal women workers which enables women to take up more productive paid work and improve their maternal and child health outcomes.

Extending the ICDS infrastructure:

- The primary mandate of the Anganwadi centres under the ICDS is to provide maternal and child nutritional security, a clean and safe environment, and early childhood education, thus facilitating the ability of women to re-enter work post-childbirth.
- However, it has major limitations like it does not cater to children under the age of three and it functions only for a few hours a day, making it inconvenient to send and pick up children during work hours or avail take-home rations provided to pregnant women and households with younger children.
- Early intake of children in the Anganwadi centres can have dual benefits i.e. allow mothers time for paid work and converge with the National Education Policy 2020 mandate that acknowledges quality Early Childhood Care and Education for children in the 0-6 age group.
- Extending the hours of Anganwadi centres can also address time constraints for working women.

- However, these expansions would also require expanding the care worker infrastructure, especially the Anganwadi workers and helpers, who are already overburdened and underpaid.

Revisit the crèche scheme:

- The National Creche Scheme lays out specific provisions for working women but has suffered diminished government funding; thus, an inclusive approach is required to diversify worksite and working hours and overcome implementation gaps.
- Revitalising the provisions of the scheme and adding a network of public and workplace crèches can be hugely beneficial if public crèches can be operated at worksite clusters such as near industrial areas, markets, dense low-income residential areas, and labour nakas which allow workers for timely breastfeeding and attending to emergencies.
- This model has been tested successfully by Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) Sangini in some Indian cities where work occurs at a single site, such as a garment factory or construction site, worksite crèches will help; as seen in the construction site crèches run by Aajeevika Bureau (Ahmedabad) and Mobile Creches (Delhi).

Financially stressful:

- Childbirth and childcare are financially stressful and compel many women to return to work within a few weeks of childbirth.
- Women in informal employment did not have maternity benefits until the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, entitled pregnant and lactating mothers to a cash transfer of at least ₹6,000.
- However, the scheme for this purpose, the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) limits the benefit to the first birth and has also reduced the amount to ₹5,000.
- States such as Tamil Nadu (Dr. Muthulakshmi Maternity Benefit Scheme), Rajasthan (Indira Gandhi Maternity Nutrition Scheme), Odisha (Mamta Scheme), Gujarat (Kasturba Poshan Sahay Yojana), and Chhattisgarh (Kaushalya Maternity Scheme) try to bridge the coverage gap, incentivising health-seeking behaviours.

Inadequate compensation:

- The Right to Food demands that universal and unconditional maternity entitlements of at least six months of the minimum wages for pregnant women and lactating mothers be implemented.

- The cash transfers under the PMMVY are insufficient, by both evaluations on the ground and the NFSA benchmark, as well as for nutrition needs and wage compensation.
- The compensation, which is lower than the minimum wages, is inadequate in postponing the mother's return to work for the first six months.

Conclusion:

- The lack of affordable and quality child care services and maternity benefits increase the burden on informal women workers, aggravating gender and class inequalities.
- Thus stakeholders should consider affordable and quality childcare infrastructure as an employment-linked benefit and as a public good.