Anganwadi Women Workers of India: The Unsung Architects of India's Human Development – The Need to R*ecognise the Contribution of Grassroots Women in Early Childhood Care, Nutrition and Community Development*

Dr. Hemamalini B.V

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Government First Grade College, Kolar

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ABSTRACT

The Anganwadi system, established under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme in 1975, is one of India's most significant social welfare interventions. At the heart of this programme are the Anganwadi Workers (AWWs), women drawn from local communities who function simultaneously as educators, nutrition facilitators, health workers, counsellors, and agents of social transformation. Their contribution extends beyond child welfare to encompass maternal health, gender empowerment, community participation, and national human capital formation. Despite their indispensable role, Anganwadi Workers continue to face inadequate remuneration, expanding workloads, and limited professional recognition. This article critically examines their contribution from historical, educational, public health, and developmental perspectives while highlighting the challenges confronting the Anganwadi system. It argues that strengthening and recognising Anganwadi Workers is essential for achieving India's developmental aspirations and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Keywords: Anganwadi Workers, ICDS, Early Childhood Care and Education, Nutrition, Women Empowerment, Human Development, Community Health, India.

INTRODUCTION

The progress of a nation is measured not merely by its economic growth but by the quality of life enjoyed by its most vulnerable citizens. Investment in children, particularly during their early years, has profound implications for education, health, productivity, and social justice. In India, this responsibility rests substantially upon the shoulders of **Anganwadi Workers (AWWs)**, who constitute one of the world's largest cadres of community-based women development workers (Ministry of Women and Child Development [MWCD], 2023).

The word *Anganwadi*, literally meaning *"courtyard shelter,"* symbolises a nurturing space where children receive care, nutrition, education, and protection. Established under the **Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)** Scheme on 2 October 1975, Anganwadi Centres have become the foundation of India's integrated strategy for improving maternal and child health, reducing malnutrition, and promoting early childhood education (Government of India, 1975).

Former United Nations Secretary-General **Kofi Annan** aptly remarked:

"There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women."

Few public programmes illustrate this observation as effectively as the Anganwadi system. By empowering women to serve as community leaders, educators, and health facilitators, the programme simultaneously advances child development and women's empowerment (UNICEF, 2019).

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Historical Evolution of the Anganwadi System

The emergence of the ICDS programme reflected India's recognition that child welfare required an integrated rather than sectoral approach. Prior to 1975, programmes addressing nutrition, health, and education largely functioned independently, limiting their overall effectiveness. The ICDS framework integrated six essential services: supplementary nutrition, immunisation, health check-ups, referral services, nutrition and health education, and preschool education (Government of India, 1975).

Over the decades, the programme has expanded significantly through initiatives such as **POSHAN Abhiyaan (National Nutrition Mission)** launched in 2018 and **Saksham Anganwadi and POSHAN 2.0**, aimed at improving nutritional outcomes, digital monitoring, and convergence among departments (MWCD, 2023).

The Anganwadi system today serves millions of beneficiaries across rural, tribal, and urban India, making it one of the largest community-based early childhood development programmes globally (UNICEF, 2021).

Anganwadi Workers as Agents of Human Development

Human development extends beyond economic indicators to encompass the expansion of people's capabilities and freedoms. Sen (1999) argues that development should be understood as the enhancement of individuals' substantive freedoms to lead lives they value. Anganwadi Workers contribute directly to this vision by improving children's health, nutrition, education, and social well-being while empowering women through health education and community participation.

Their responsibilities include:

- Growth monitoring and nutritional surveillance
- Preschool education
- Maternal counselling
- Immunisation support
- Home visits
- Health record maintenance
- Community mobilisation
- Referral services for vulnerable children and mothers

These responsibilities place Anganwadi Workers at the intersection of public health, education, and social welfare, making them indispensable actors in India's human development strategy (NITI Aayog, 2017).

Early Childhood Care and Education: Investing in the Future

Scientific evidence consistently demonstrates that the first five years of life constitute the most critical period of brain development. According to the **World Health Organization (WHO)** and **UNICEF**, responsive caregiving, adequate nutrition, early learning opportunities, and emotional security during this period significantly influence cognitive development and lifelong well-being (WHO et al., 2018).

The **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** identifies **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)** as the foundation of all future learning and recommends integrating Anganwadi Centres into India's educational framework (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Educational philosopher **Maria Montessori** observed: *The greatest sign of success for a teacher is to be able to say, 'The children are now working as if I did not exist.'"*

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Although Anganwadi Workers are rarely recognised as teachers in the formal sense, they introduce children to structured learning through storytelling, songs, games, art, and play-based pedagogy. Research indicates that quality ECCE improves school readiness, reduces dropout rates, and contributes to improved educational outcomes throughout life (UNESCO, 2022).

Nutrition, Health, and Public Welfare

Child malnutrition remains one of India's most pressing developmental concerns. The **National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5)** indicates that although improvements have occurred over the past decade, stunting, wasting, and underweight continue to affect a significant proportion of Indian children (International Institute for Population Sciences [IIPS] & ICF, 2021).

Anganwadi Workers address these challenges through:

- Supplementary nutrition
- Growth monitoring
- Nutrition counselling
- Promotion of exclusive breastfeeding
- Health awareness programmes
- Referral of severely malnourished children

Former Executive Director of the World Food Programme **David Beasley** observed:*"Hunger is not about food. It is about dignity."*Their work therefore extends beyond food distribution to protecting children's dignity, health, and future opportunities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Anganwadi Workers demonstrated extraordinary resilience by distributing take-home rations, supporting immunisation drives, monitoring vulnerable households, and assisting public health authorities under extremely challenging conditions (MWCD, 2021).

Women Empowering Communities

One of the greatest strengths of the Anganwadi programme lies in its reliance upon women recruited from local communities. Their familiarity with local languages, customs, and cultural practices enables them to establish trust and promote behavioural change more effectively than externally appointed officials.

As **Malala Yousafzai** reminds us:*"When women are empowered, they improve the lives of everyone around them."*

Studies indicate that Anganwadi Workers contribute significantly to women's health awareness, institutional deliveries, child immunisation, nutritional practices, and community participation, thereby strengthening both gender equality and local governance (UNICEF, 2021).

Challenges Facing Anganwadi Workers

Despite their multifaceted contributions, Anganwadi Workers continue to encounter significant structural constraints.

Inadequate Remuneration

Most Anganwadi Workers receive honoraria rather than salaries despite performing responsibilities comparable to trained professionals in education, health, and social welfare. Several expert committees have recommended improving their financial security and employment conditions (Planning Commission, 2013).

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Increasing Administrative Burden

In addition to childcare and nutrition services, workers participate in elections, health surveys, disaster management, vaccination campaigns, census activities, and digital reporting. The expansion of responsibilities has often occurred without proportional increases in compensation or staffing (MWCD, 2023).

Infrastructure Constraints

Many Anganwadi Centres continue to operate without adequate classrooms, sanitation facilities, safe drinking water, kitchens, storage facilities, or child-friendly learning environments, particularly in remote and tribal regions (NITI Aayog, 2017).

Digital Transformation

The introduction of digital applications such as the **POSHAN Tracker** has improved monitoring and accountability but has also increased reporting responsibilities. Continuous training and technological support remain essential for effective implementation (MWCD, 2023).

Professional Recognition

Perhaps the greatest challenge lies in the limited public recognition accorded to Anganwadi Workers despite their substantial contribution to national development.

Mahatma Gandhi's words remain particularly relevant:

"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

Their service exemplifies this philosophy, yet it often remains invisible within public discourse.

Anganwadi Workers and Sustainable Development

The contribution of Anganwadi Workers aligns closely with the **United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.

Their work directly advances:

- SDG 1: No Poverty
- SDG 2: Zero Hunger
- SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being
- SDG 4: Quality Education
- SDG 5: Gender Equality
- SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

Consequently, strengthening the Anganwadi system contributes not only to India's national development agenda but also to its international commitments under the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** (United Nations, 2015).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A comprehensive strengthening of the Anganwadi system should include:

- Revision of honoraria with social security benefits.

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- Continuous professional development in ECCE, nutrition, counselling, and digital literacy.
- Improved infrastructure with child-friendly learning environments.
- Simplification of reporting requirements.
- Better convergence among Health, Education, and Women & Child Development Departments.
- Career advancement pathways linked to higher qualifications.
- Greater community recognition through awards and public appreciation.

Nobel Laureate **James Heckman** argues:*"The highest rate of return in early childhood development comes from investing as early as possible"* (Heckman, 2006, p. 1902).

Investment in Anganwadi Workers therefore represents both a social obligation and an economically sound public policy.

CONCLUSION

India's aspiration to become a developed nation depends fundamentally upon investing in its children. At the centre of this investment stand the Anganwadi Workers, whose daily efforts nurture healthier children, empower mothers, strengthen communities, and enhance national human capital.

Their contribution extends far beyond the implementation of government schemes. They are educators, caregivers, counsellors, nutrition facilitators, community leaders, and advocates for social justice. Yet their commitment is often met with inadequate remuneration, increasing workloads, and insufficient recognition.

As **Nelson Mandela** wisely observed:*"There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children."*

Recognising, professionalising, and strengthening the Anganwadi workforce is therefore not merely a welfare initiative but an investment in India's democratic future, human capabilities, and inclusive development.

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