

UNIVERSALISE MATERNITY BENEFIT SCHEME, SAY ACTIVISTS

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A woman cradles her baby at her worksite in Vijayawada. V RAJU

The government's recent announcement that the maternity benefit programme which provides Rs. 5,000 for first child will be extended to cover the second child only if it is a girl has met with sharp criticism from activists who have demanded that it be universalised.

The Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY), launched in 2017, provides Rs. 5,000 for the birth of the first child to partially compensate a woman for loss of wages. It also aims to improve the nutritional well-being of the mother and the child. The amount is given in three instalments upon meeting certain conditions. It is combined with another scheme, Janani Suraksha Yojana, under which nearly Rs. 1,000 is given for an institutional birth, so that a woman gets a total of Rs. 6,000.

"Under the revamped PMMVY under Mission Shakti, the maternity benefit amounting to Rs. 6000 is also to be provided for the second child, but only if the second is a girl child, to discourage pre-birth sex selection and promote the girl child," Minister for Women and Child Development Smriti Irani told the Lok Sabha last week.

"Firstly, to provide maternity benefit only to the mother of the first-born is illegal as the National Food Security Act, 2013 lays down that every pregnant woman and lactating mother are entitled to it. Then to couch it to say that it is to promote the birth of a girl child is nothing but posturing" says Jashodhara Dasgupta, co-convenor, Feminist Policy Collective.

She says that adding more conditions to the scheme will prove to be a bureaucratic nightmare, which can be overcome if the scheme is universalised.

"During COVID-19 in the past two years, ASHA [accredited social health activist] workers have not been giving out contraceptive supplies. When the State has failed to provide contraceptive services, why is it penalising women for having babies," asserts Ms. Dasgupta. "The new announcement implies that women will be able to access the scheme only after the delivery, which will not have any impact on their nutritional uptake during the course of their pregnancy," says Raghvesh Ranjan, Director, Social and Economic Empowerment, IPE Global.

One of the objectives of the scheme is to also improve health seeking behaviour of women and, therefore, the first instalment of Rs. 1,000 is given after ascertaining early registration of pregnancy and the second instalment of Rs. 2,000 is given after an ante-natal check after six months of pregnancy and the final instalment of Rs. 2,000 is given after the registration of the child birth and vaccinations for the newborn. Though the Minister shared the information days after the Union Budget, the allocation for the scheme has not shown a notable increase. The scheme is clubbed with several other programmes under the Samarthya scheme. The allocation of Rs. 2,522 crore for the umbrella scheme last fiscal was almost the same as the allocation of Rs. 2,500 crore for the PMMVY alone the year before. For financial year 2022-2023, the umbrella scheme has seen a total increase of Rs. 100 crore.

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