

# INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Women - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

At a construction site | Photo Credit: Sudipto Mondal

The theme for International Women's Day 2022 (March 8) is 'gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow'. However, gender equality is still a far cry for India's female informal workforce. 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". However, we know little about how informal work affects maternal, neonatal, and child health, with the lack of childcare solutions being a serious concern. 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. 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.

India has paid less attention to address concerns around childcare support for informal women workers. Here are three ways to enable women to take up more productive paid work and improve their maternal and child health outcomes: extending the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) infrastructure; revitalising national crèche schemes, and improving maternity benefits.

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 two major limitations. First, it does not cater to children under the age of three. Second, 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 — 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 worker and helper, who are already overburdened and underpaid.

The National Creche Scheme lays out specific provisions for working women but has suffered diminished government funding. 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. Public crèches

can be operated at worksite clusters such as near industrial areas, markets, dense low-income residential areas, and labour *nakas*. Crèches closer to the workplace allow 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). The construction sector is a case in point where the Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board mandates the running of crèches. The funds collected under the construction cess can be earmarked for running crèches at construction sites.

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 notified 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. Of these, Tamil Nadu has an expansive and ambitious scheme offering 18,000 in cash and kind for two live births. 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. The amount also does not match an inflation-adjusted NFSA benchmark (nearly 9,400 in 2022).

The lack of affordable and quality childcare services and maternity benefits increase the burden on informal women workers, aggravating gender and class inequalities. Presently, it is up to individuals and families to find a resolution to this tension of a worker-mother, putting women, girls, and children at a gross disadvantage. It is imperative that we consider affordable and quality childcare infrastructure as an employment-linked benefit and as a public good.

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