

POLICY BRIEF

Mobile Creches

In its current strategic curve, Mobile Creches is trying to harness the knowledge about young child issues – gained from decades of engagement with parent communities, businesses, practitioners, advocates, programme implementers and policy makers – in the form of a biennial Report on the State of the Young Child in India. The **State of the Young Child in India** (SOYC) Report is the first such major knowledge product in this direction. Taking a step further, the Report is complemented by a series of policy briefs, drawn from the Report's findings, with an intention to reach policy makers and other relevant stakeholders who are in a position to influence changes on behalf of the young child in India.

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Policy Brief 03

Extending Early Childhood Services: From Anganwadis to Anganwadis-cum-Creches

Brief Summary

ICDS, India's flagship programme for young children, covers over 48% of children under the age of six years. Lack of universal access to safe and quality childcare services directly and adversely impacts developmental outcomes for children under six. As the ICDS already has infrastructure in place across the country, there is a huge untapped potential. The programme must be restructured and expanded to include a growing demands for crèches. For marginalised communities and families to have access to childcare services, it is crucial to envisage a phased conversion of anganwadis into anganwadi-cum-crèches. Crèches have

the potential to provide a nurturing and safe environment for young children as well as to improve labour market outcomes for women.

Introduction

Childcare is linked inextricably to the conditions of families, more so mothers, who are invariably weighed down by the triple burden of unpaid work on household chores, the work of child rearing, and paid work responsibilities. The changes brought about by globalisation both in terms of migration, and breaking away of the traditional joint family system, as well as increasing inequalities, has meant that childcare is severely and adversely

impacted. Where both parents are in paid work, especially in the unorganised sector, and/or living in slums, young children are often found in unhygienic conditions on roadsides, or being taken care of by elder siblings, especially by the girl child. This not only impacts the care and development of the children as they are left increasingly vulnerable with more potential for deprivation but also negatively impacts education opportunities for girls and women's participation in the paid workforce.

One of the key recommendations in the SOYC Report for complementing family care with care and learning outside the home is the phased conversion of anganwadis into anganwadis-cum-crèches. Childcare needs to be reimagined as a mandate for all children requiring care across varied settings. This Policy Brief advocates the fulfilment of the unmet need for crèches and day-care centres. This is done alongside the recognition of the crucial role of families in nurturing and care of the young child. However, multiple limits of poverty, exclusion, livelihood insecurity, parents' work commitments necessitate for childcare services to be provided by the State. Therefore, it is crucial to focus on the importance of State intervention in establishing and regulating quality crèche services as a mandate for all children requiring care, whether at worksites or in neighbourhoods, to support working parents. The SOYC Report recommends that there must be a phased conversion of Anganwadis into anganwadi-cum-crèches. The new National Education Policy, 2020, [which was released after the SOYC Report was completed] has rightly identified ICDS as

one of the four models to deliver ECCE. Therefore, it is timely to initiate action to universalize anganwadi-cum-creches. Identifying and mapping areas that have the greatest need will be a good starting point. This will ensure that children under three years receive care outside home settings, and families receive complementary parental support.

Safe and Nurturing Spaces: The Benefits of Crèche Services

A study on need assessment of crèches (2013) commissioned by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, notes that the high malnutrition and mortality rates, especially among young children from poor and marginalised sections, necessitate urgent policy attention towards the establishment of crèchesⁱ. Varied socio-economic conditions impact the living standards of families, and the required nutrition, protection, and care they can provide their children.

Crèches have the potential to provide a safe, regulated environment for children, with age appropriate activities, and ways of stimulation and care in addition to covering nutritional aspects to enable the all-round development of a child. Monitoring of the varied parameters of the well-being of a child in crèches can also allow to keep a track of their health and address deficiencies, if any.

In cases where both parents are engaged in work and there is an absence of adult caregivers at home, crèches play an important role in care and development of the child. An impact assessment of SEWA's child care programme (2011)ⁱⁱ on the

mothers of children enrolled in these centres showed an improvement in mobility and the working life of mothers and the overall development of the child. With a reduced burden in the household, women found their work resulting in better economic outcomes, thereby improving the quality of life for the family.

The children of women working in the unorganised sector are invariably taken along to the construction sites, brick kilns, as the absence of on-site child care leaves their mothers with no other option. In other cases such children are either neglected, or put under the care of an elder sibling. Crèches can provide a congenial environment to these children, otherwise left at the margins of rights and entitlements to care and protection.

The provision of crèche services which improve access to childcare services by parents, can also address the "falling engagement of women" in the labour force in Indiaⁱⁱⁱ. Women's economic empowerment is critical towards the realisation of human rights and gender equality^{iv}. Not only does it have multiplier benefits on the economy, it also allows for more participation of women in household decisions, and more control over their time, lives, and bodies^v. With women's workforce participation enabled by provision of childcare services, the family doing better on the economic front can then also translate into better dietary intake for the young child and the mother. For the girl child often daunted with the responsibility of taking care of a younger sibling, provision of adequate crèche services also reduces such a burden and enables her to pursue education and developmental needs.

Mapping the Gaps

The current lack of such services is known to have a negative impact for children as well as parents, especially the most marginalized. When private daycare centres are seen mushrooming to fulfil the unmet demand for crèches, not only is the quality of childcare services impacted and made more unaffordable for certain families, the lack of regulation also allows for such centres not adhering to minimum quality standards.

The 12th plan took serious note of this longstanding need for crèches as it envisioned a conversion of Anganwadi Centres into anganwadi-cum-crèches, which was approved for 5% under the strengthened and restructured ICDS. However, despite such a promising thrust, by 2018, the government had moved back from the vision. In fact, over time, there has been the issue of the stoppage of funding and improper allocation of resources, resulting in the gradual closing down of AWCCs where they had been set up, thus again missing out on the opportunity to provide adequate childcare opportunities for children of women working in the informal sector. The number of functional creches under the National Creche Scheme (NCS)^{vi}, fell drastically from 23,555 in 2014^{vii}, to 7,000 by 2019.^{viii} A major reason for this has been noted to be the 'disappearing budget' allocation, with the Union government reducing its cost-bearing ratio from 90:10 with the states to 60:40. This has resulted in thousands of crèches across the country not receiving payments and many stopped functioning.^{ix} The NCS is a grant-in-aid scheme to be managed by NGOs who bear 10% of the costs and the declining funds from the

Union government has also kept the NGOs away.

Although the provision of creches is mandatory under various labour laws, including Factories Act, 1948, the Mines Act, 1952, the Plantation Act, 1951, the Inter-State Migrant Workman Act of 1980, Building and Other Construction Workers Act (BOCWA) of 1996, and MNREGA, 2005, it is subject to the number of women workers, which is inconsistent across the laws. The absence of sufficient guidelines and due regulations has also meant that even when such legal provisions exist, they are not successful in creating enough pressure for such entitlements. The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, (amended in 2017), mandates that every establishment with 50 or more employees, irrespective of gender, should establish crèche facilities. However, as the law also mandates that the entire cost should be borne by the employers as per the guidelines, it could result in a negative trend in hiring women because of the additional costs of paid leave.^x The lack of childcare is a major obstacle when it comes to full and equal participation of women in the workforce. Their workforce participation rate of 25% in India, one of the lowest in the world, is reflective of the need for and absence of crèche services.^{xi}

The number of state-supported crèches has over the years fallen to a low of around 7,000 in 2019 which translates to one crèche per 21,000 children.^{xii} Such low investment and intervention by the state, reflected in financial allocations, implementation and administrative issues, has severely impacted the access of marginalised families to childcare services.

Budget requirements

As noted in the previous section and analysed in detail in the SOYC Report, the budgetary allocations towards childcare services by the State is minimal. When it comes to specific provision for crèches, including anganwadi-cum-crèche services, the allocation is close to negligible and has resulted in the closing down of such centres in many states.

An analysis of the required financial allocation from the SOYC Report shows that the annual budget required to support 100,000 anganwadi-cum-crèches is INR 30.36 billion, the benefits of which will trickle to the most marginalized, both rural and urban poor households, backward classes and castes that currently don't have access to such services which impacts women's participation in the workforce as well. The additional nutrition cost, since it will have to cover a full day's nutrition and not just the supplementary component, is estimated to be INR 10 per child per day, while the additional helper would cost INR 7,000 and the crèche worker INR 10,000 per month.

Policy recommendations

- The AWCs must be converted into anganwadi-cum-crèches, with an additional helper and crèche worker complementing the Anganwadi Worker. This will require the appointment of these trained personnel, who would need to be provided due recognition and remuneration as a professional cadre^{xiii} as well as space and equipment for full-day care as delineated by MWCD in the minimum required guidelines for crèches.

- In the first phase, 100,000 anganwadi-cum-crèches are proposed, with a major 80 percent of them to be established in rural areas of states with poorest child indicators, as highlighted by state rankings in the Young Child Indices in SOYC^{xiv}. The rest must be established in urban slums, in properly constructed, safe buildings. The AWCCs can then be expanded depending on the block by block mapping, and demand for such services.

- The NCS must be recalibrated to increase the financial allocations so that at least two workers and a helper are employed for a unit of 25 children. The crèches must be made flexible with regard to timings for parents working beyond the normal day hours and should address the urgent requirements of the local communities.

- This additional expenditure in setting up Anganwadi-cum-creches is justified both because it the right of each child to have a caring and nurturing environment, and the social and economic returns to this investment are high. Well planned creches services fill a critical gap in the childcare system, enhance women's work participation thereby increasing overall labour factor productivity, and enable girls who present attend to their siblings, to complete their education.

Childhood Research Quarterly, No. 25, pp. 166-176.

ⁱⁱⁱ National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) (2000), cited in Mitter, R., & Putcha, V. (2018). Strengthening and supporting the early childhood workforce: training and professional development. Washington, DC: Results for Development Institute.

^{iv} Manning, M., Garvis, S., Fleming, C., Wong, T. W. G., (2017). The relationship between teacher qualification and the quality of the early childhood care and learning environment. Campbell Systematic Reviews.

^v A gender transformative approach in ECCE programmes, as the SOYC Report notes, is one where they engage parents, caregivers, community leaders and educators so that unequal gendered norms and beliefs are challenged from an early age and equal care and opportunities are provided to children of all genders in addition to promoting men's involvement in parenting as well as supporting women's right to health, and empowerment, including promoting their participation in the workforce.

^{vi} <https://www.cyc-net.org/profession/pro-whitehead.html>

^{vii}

<https://qz.com/india/1584703/indias-icds-anganwadi-system-is-a-challenged-but-impressive-effort/>

^{viii} For more on this, see, Mobile Creches (2020), Making ECCE a Justiciable Right: Extend RTE to children under six years. Policy Brief 01.

Endnotes:

ⁱ See Shonkoff, J.P. and A.D. Phillips (2000), *From Neurons to Neighbourhoods*, National Academy Press, Washington DC; also see, Sammons et al. (2002), *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Technical Paper 8a - Measuring the Impact of Pre-School on Children's Cognitive Progress over the Pre-School Period*, London: DfES/Institute of Education, University of London.

ⁱⁱ Burchinal et al. (2010), "Threshold Analysis of Association between Child Care Quality and Child Outcomes for Low-income Children in Pre-kindergarten Programmes", *Early*