

## **The Need to reopen Anganwadis**

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#### **What is the issue?**

Anganwadis perform a crucial role in contributing to life outcomes of children across India. India must invest robustly in the world's largest social programme on early childhood services.

#### **What is the importance of Anganwadis?**

- As part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Anganwadis play a crucial role in supporting households, particularly from low-income families.
- It provides childcare, health and nutrition, education, supplementary nutrition, immunisation, health check-up and referral services.
- Early childhood (till 5 years) is a crucial developmental window.
- As platforms for early childhood education and nutrition support, Anganwadis can play an important role for children to achieve their potential.
- Sending younger children to Anganwadis will free up women's time, including for economic activities.
- Surveys by ID insight across 5 States found that anganwadi workers were a primary source of nutrition information for families.
- The largest in the world, ICDS covers about 88 million children aged 0-6 years in India.
- The National Education Policy, 2020, places Anganwadis at the centre of the push to universalise access to early childhood care and education (ECCE).

#### **What are the impacts of closing Anganwadis during pandemic?**

- Their closure has significantly impacted service delivery and weakened an important social safety net.
- **Increase in work load for women-** A recent study estimates that the time women spend on unpaid work have increased by 30% during the pandemic.

- In our COVID-19 rural household surveys across 8 states shows 58% of women cited home-schooling as the biggest contributor to increase in unpaid work.
- **Coverage** - According to NFHS-5 during pandemic less than 15% of five year old children attended any pre-primary school.
- Last week, the government proposed a phased rollout of ECCE programme across all Anganwadis, covering one-fifth each year, starting from 2021-22.

### What are the areas to improve?

- **Skill Enhancement** - Despite being the primary source of information on nutrition, anganwadi workers lack key knowledge - as found by studies from Delhi and Bihar.
- Among mothers listed with anganwadi workers, knowledge about key health behaviour such as complementary feeding and hand washing was low
- Anganwadi workers lack support or training to provide ECCE.
- **Lack of time** - Administrative responsibilities take up significant time, and core services like pre-school education are deprioritised.
- A typical worker spends around 10% of their time (28 min/day) on pre-school education against recommended (120 min/day).
- Improve career incentives and remuneration and hiring additional workers are some way to ensure they have more time.
- **Infrastructure** - Anganwadis often lack adequate infrastructure. As per NITI Aayog only 59% Anganwadis had adequate seating facilities. More than half were unhygienic.
- **Coverage** - Utilisation of early childcare services at Anganwadis stands at 28% in urban areas compared to 42% for rural areas, according to NFHS-4 data.
- Recent initiatives around home-based newborn and young child care are promising, but they need to extend beyond the first few months of a child's life.
- **Investment** - To improve these outcomes, we need to invest more in Anganwadis, and roll out proven innovative interventions.

### What are some achievements so far?

- Studies in Odisha and Andhra Pradesh (and globally) have found that home visits have significantly improved cognition, language, motor development and nutritional intake while also reducing stunting.

- A study in Tamil Nadu shows that reaching out to women during pregnancy has increased the likelihood that their children use ICDS services.
- A recent study in Tamil Nadu found that an additional worker devoted to pre-school education led to cost effective gains in both learning and nutrition.
- Policymakers have tried linking Anganwadis and primary schools to strengthen convergence, as well as expanding the duration of daycares at Anganwadis.
- In order to boost coverage as they reopen, large scale enrolment drives that worked in Gujarat helped mobilise eligible children.
- As the world's largest provider of early childhood services, Anganwadis perform a crucial role in contributing to life outcomes of children across India.

## Reference

1. <https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/the-need-to-reopen-anganwadis/article37859810.ece>

