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Empowering women, strengthening the next generation

This article is authored by Dr NK Ganguly, former director general, Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

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By NK Ganguly

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Children's development during early childhood depends on many factors like health care, early learning, interactions with peers, and nutrition. Of these, nutrition is one of the most important. Good nutrition helps children stay healthy, which, in turn, affects their learning, education, and overall well-being. However, a child's nutrition depends on who is raising them. Which brings us to a crucial but often overlooked part of the conversation: Women.

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Women empowerment (Voices of Youth)

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A study based on India’s National Family Health Survey-4 found that children were less likely to be stunted (when height is significantly below average for age) when their mothers had greater economic autonomy. This finding invites us to think more broadly about how women’s financial choices can shape a child's food choices.

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Women may be better placed to decide when health care is needed, what food families purchase, how resources are used for education and how the household responds when an unexpected expense arises. Equally important, she can invest in her own health, nutrition and wellbeing.

The question then is: How do we translate this understanding into opportunity while centring solutions that reflect women's realities?

For many women, their inability to participate in the workforce depends on a combination of barriers such as interrupted education, early marriage, poor health, unpaid care responsibilities, limited access to banking and credit, and unsafe commutes to work.

Travelling long distances for work can add costs, raise safety concerns, and take hours away from home. Fixed or inflexible working hours can be difficult for women who continue to shoulder much of the responsibility for childcare and household work.

Lack of access to banking and credit significantly hampers their ability to start and expand their enterprise. Without loans, increasing production, purchasing equipment, and hiring new staff becomes severely restricted.

Additionally, health is another factor that determines women's economic participation. Anaemia, poor nutrition, and reproductive health concerns can affect efficiency at work.

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This is where anganwadis can play a larger role. Because they are embedded within communities, they can become local access points that bring together skilling, childcare support, health and nutrition awareness, financial inclusion and livelihood opportunities.

Anganwadis can become gateways that connect women with the larger ecosystem of skilling, employment, and entrepreneurship. Since they work at hyperlocal levels, they could host skilling programmes suited to opportunities in specific localities. A woman interested in employment could be linked with nearby businesses and institutions looking for workers. Another woman may want to start a small enterprise and require support with financial literacy, credit, digital payments, business planning or access to markets.

They can also serve as an information hub where women can be informed about preventive health information, nutrition services and existing government schemes can help address conditions that may affect their ability to work consistently.

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Vedanta's Nand Ghar offers one example of how this infrastructure can be used more broadly. The initiative has transformed anganwadi centres into community hubs that bring together nutrition, early learning, health care and women's empowerment. The same centres are also used to support skill development and livelihood activities for women, allowing community infrastructure to serve both children and the women caring for them. The model also goes beyond training alone. Women are connected with entrepreneurship development, credit linkages, government schemes and income-generating opportunities, including job work, placements and market access.

Such models show that the bigger opportunity is to see the anganwadi not only as a place where investment is made in a child's early years, but also as a community platform that can strengthen women's economic agency.

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For anganwadis to realise their potential, collaboration is essential. Government can provide the reach, infrastructure and connections to existing schemes, while private-sector partners can bring training expertise, technology, market linkages, financial literacy and access to employment opportunities. Civil society organisations and local institutions can help ensure that programmes remain rooted in the realities of women and communities. They can ensure that skilling programmes are relevant and that

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CSR programmes can facilitate health check-ups and supplements. Financial institutions can support access to credit, while digital platforms can expand access to customers and services.

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The value of such partnerships lies in bringing different strengths together around a shared objective of creating practical, sustainable pathways for women to earn and exercise greater economic choice.

A financially independent woman has choices, confidence, and the ability to shape decisions that affect the family. When women have greater economic agency and good health, the benefits can extend to their children's health, nutrition, education and future. By using trusted community platforms such as anganwadis to bring skilling, childcare and livelihood opportunities closer to women, India can empower women and give children's development a stronger start.

(The views expressed are personal)

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Women