VIRODH
ANGANWADIS IN PROTEST

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As part of the Fifth Five Year Plan in 1975, the Ministry of Social Welfare developed the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), which is one of the world’s most comprehensive programs for early childhood care and development. *Anganwadi* Workers (AWWs) and *Anganwadi* Helpers (AWHs) are appointed as honorary workers under the ambit of this scheme. They are required to work with pregnant women, lactating mothers and children between the ages of 0 to 6 years. Women involved in implementing this scheme conduct door-to-door visits where they engage in a dialogue with parents about child-rearing, conduct surveys and run a centre for child development, amongst other things. *Anganwadis* are often seen as a cost-effective method of raising a generation of healthy, socially proficient, and productive individuals.

While this scheme attempts to eradicate the rampant malnutrition and uplift the lives of women and children in India, it fails to honour the people who make it possible. Time and again, AWWs and AWHs have spoken out regarding their abysmal work conditions. Despite their seniority and decades of service, these women remain faceless statistics or cogs in the ICDS's wheel at best. The government has failed to gauge the critical role played by AWWs and AWHs, evaluate their interests, and galvanise the largest group of these barefoot employees.
The constant undermining of their work, long working hours and negligible pay are some of the reasons behind the recent flare-up between AWWs and AWHs. The virodh (rebellion), inspired by the kisan andolan (farmer’s protest), started in Haryana on 8 December 2021. The protesters sat near the District Commissioner’s office to put forth their demands. It eventually gave impetus to other anganwadi movements across the nation. The andolan observed various other stakeholders of the ICDS scheme, such as ASHAs and Midday Meal staff, join them in solidarity.

The motivation and strength displayed by the workers marked one of the biggest women-led andolan in India.
This agitation began as rage over the false promises that the Central Government had made during the live broadcasting of ‘Mann Ki Baat’ in September 2018. PM Narendra Modi, promised a ₹1500 and ₹750 hike in payment for AWWs and AWHs, respectively, as a token of appreciation for their tireless efforts in the development of mothers’ and children's wellbeing. However, even after four years, this money is yet to reflect in their accounts.

Currently, AWWs and AWHs have the status of “honorary workers” and are compensated in the form of an “honorarium”. Haryana, which pays the highest honorarium, offers ₹11,000 to AWWs and ₹6,000 to AWHs. Considering the ever-increasing cost of living, this honorarium does not fulfil all their needs. More often than not, AWWs and AWHs come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and they depend on the honorarium to support themselves and their households. Hence, they often struggle to make ends meet and are forced to take additional jobs to pay their bills and fulfil their family’s needs. Therefore, one of their primary demands from the government is to get a salary according to the minimum wage criteria.
Additionally, the status of honorary workers does not do justice to the number of duties thrust upon the AWWs and AWHs and the hours they are required to put in. As the primary respondent in the field, they not only gather data on children's development and education, but also provide food to children, pregnant women and mothers, as well as provide information on vaccines, hygiene and healthcare. Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, they were allocated door duty to support ASHAs (for which they did not receive any extra compensation). Consequently, they have been requesting the government to give them the status of a government employee so that their work is not undermined and they get to enjoy the benefits of being a government official.

“KAAM PAKKA HAI TOH WORKERS BHI PAKKE HONE CHAHIYE” - “THE WORK IS PERMANENT AND EFFORTFUL, THEN THE WORKERS AS WELL SHOULD BE GIVEN PERMANENT, SECURE POSITIONS AS GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES” - SUNITA, CITU, SONIPAT.
Furthermore, the protestors also mentioned the persistence of gender stereotypes and gendered expectations, norms, and attitudes, alongside structural discrimination, for perpetuating exploitation of their labour. As women workers, AWWs and AWHs are a victim of gross violations of labour standards, working hours, and unequal wages, amongst others. This under-paid, semi-literate labour as India's first respondent for children’s nutrition, health and skills development is seemingly facing the repercussions of being a woman in today’s workforce.
The protestors have also expressed their serious reservations against the introduction of the Poshan Tracker app. The government’s attempt at digitalisation of the angnwadi system is not well received by the AWWs and AWHs. Not all AWWs have access to a smartphone that will allow them to download the application. Even if they do have a touchscreen mobile, they do not necessarily know how to operate it properly. Most AWWs lack digital literacy and are not technologically inclined. Without training, which is not being offered currently, it would be next to impossible for the AWWs to transition to a digital platform smoothly. The AWWs also highlight the lack of electricity, high cost-price of availing of internet facilities and lack of reliable network service in the villages.

“THIS POSHAN TRACKER APP THAT WE ARE BEING FORCED TO USE WILL MAKE EVERYTHING ONLINE. OUR SISTERS CANNOT DO THIS BECAUSE ALMOST ALL OF THEM ARE 10TH PASS AND DO NOT KNOW HOW TO WORK A TOUCH SCREEN MOBILE. IN FACT, THEY KEEP A TINY PHONE. THEY ARE UNSKILLED IN THIS ARENA.”
- GEETA, ANGANWADI WORKER.
Lastly, highlighting the discontent with the current government's functioning, the protestors cite instances of the inconvenience caused to them. During the pandemic, basic supplies like masks, sanitisers, etc., remained inaccessible. There is also a stark lack of infrastructure for running anganwadi centres. For instance, only 39.8% of anganwadi centres are equipped with tap water connections. Nearly all the anganwadi workers and helpers point out the dire need for more supplies to educate the children adequately. The lack of basic amenities like notebooks, tables, chairs, fans, etc. is hindering the work of AWWs and AWHs and impeding the development of children’s motor skills and thinking abilities.

“THE MOST IMPORTANT INFRASTRUCTURAL NEED IS THE SEATING ARRANGEMENT FOR CHILDREN. NEITHER CHILDREN OR THE TEACHERS HAVE THAT RIGHT NOW. WE HAVE NO RESOURCES TO SET UP CLASSES. IF I SETUP THE ANGANWADI NOW, IT WILL HAVE TO BE IN A RENTED CENTER, WHICH I WILL HAVE TO PAY FOR.”

- MANISHA, ANGANWADI WORKER.
It is unfortunate that the workers, who put their heart and soul into the scheme introduced by the Government of India for the benefit of society, are being mistreated. The issues of undermining their role, non-payment of their allowances, being overworked, and a general lack of clarity on the work to be undertaken, have left everyone questioning the government and its treatment of grassroots-level workers.