

Footsoldiers ask for a Better Deal

by Kathyayini Chamaraj

November 20, 2005

Who are India's footsoldiers for the Millennium Development Goals (which all countries, including India, are committed to achieving by 2015)? Who works at the grassroots level to reduce infant and maternal mortality, prevent malnutrition among mothers and pre-school children, register births and death, provide pre-school education to all three- to six-year-olds - in short, all the work essential to lifting India from its shameful 127th position in the UNDP's Human Development Index 2005?

Who works to conduct ground-level surveys for several government departments, form self-help groups of women, support the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, encourage small savings, create AIDS and tuberculosis awareness, generate opinion against social evils like dowry, detect bogus ration cards? And then again, who attends to the less glamorous tasks, like bringing crowds or arranging flowers, food and tea for every function at the village level?

The wonder of it all is that all these disparate - and crucial - tasks vest with one crucial worker - the anganwadi worker (AWW), who is in charge of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) launched by the Central government. There are about 700,000 AWWs working all over the country, with an equal number of helpers.

The irony is although the AWW performs all these tasks for the government, she is not a government servant, but a 'voluntary worker' who earns a mere Rs 1,000 a month as 'honorarium'. Her helpers receive about Rs 500 on an average. S Varalakshmi, President of the Karnataka Branch of the All-India Anganwadi Workers' and Helpers' Foundation (AIAWHF), says, "Many AWWs do not receive even the meager salary and increments on time. Many need to pay bribes to officials to get jobs or transfers. They have no service rules, job security, retirement age or pension benefits."

It was to address this and other concerns of AWWs that the AIAWHF held its Fifth Annual Conference in Bangalore (November 8 to 11, 2005).

These women are not 'social workers'; they are often poor, widowed or deserted women, badly in need of employment. Says K C Basavaraj, a former General Secretary of the Karnataka State Anganawadi Workers' and Helpers' Association, "The paradox is that AWWs look after the children of unorganized workers, but are unable to feed their own children or send them to school."

Thirty years after the ICDS was initiated, unions have had to wage intense struggles even for the meager salary AWWs currently get. "The AWWs have achieved a national federation, though the workers are scattered all over the country, with only about two workers per village," says K Hemalatha, secretary, AIAWHF.

Though the ICDS is crucial, it currently reaches only 34 million, or a third, of the total 160 million children in the country, and there are only 600,000 anganwadi centers (AWCs) as against 1.4 million habitations in rural areas, according to a September 2004 report by Jean Drèze and Shonali Sen. They say that the total expenditure on ICDS is only around Rs 30, billion - just 0.1

per cent of India's GDP. Precisely because of this inadequacy, the Supreme Court ruled in the Right to Food case in November 2001 that there should be an ICDS centre in every habitation.

Often, food supplies to AWCs are inadequate, of poor quality or late in arrival, sometimes due to pilferage at higher levels. But responsibility for the siphoning and any high rate of infant mortality rate or malnourishment is placed at the AWW's doorstep. On an average, there is a 50 per cent under-utilization of funds by the states, which further prevents AWWs from producing nutritious meals. A worrying situation in a country where 50 per cent of all children are malnourished - the highest figure in the world - and around one-third are born with low birth-weight. Despite these resource constraints, AWWs are expected to dish up 'some' food and wipe out malnutrition among children.

In April 2004, the Supreme Court had directed the Government of India to file an affidavit stating by when it proposes to cover all 1.4 million habitations in India with AWCs. In fulfilling the directive, the United Progressive Alliance government sanctioned 188,168 more AWCs in September 2005. However, if all the government is planning is to set up more centers like the ones already existing, this is not enough.

Many AWCs are run under trees or from the homes of AWWs and lack basic equipment, such as medical kits, safe drinking water, cooking vessels or even a weighing machine. Often AWWs have to impart pre-school education without proper teaching aids, toys or charts. Most anganwadi centers have no toilets, and so children learn unsanitary practices. It is under these infrastructure constraints that AWWs lay the foundation for the education of these children of mostly illiterate parents.

Although, officially, AWWs are required to work for four hours, they end up working much longer due to indiscriminate heaping of additional tasks. They have to provide home visits to check on pregnant mothers or new-born babies and conduct 'nutrition and health education' classes. Many helpers have to search for fuel-wood for an hour or two hours after working hours. Dririjze and Sen say that there is an urgent need to clearly define the AWW's tasks in tune with her qualifications and "the infrastructure and resources made available to her", and to avoid duties unrelated to ICDS.

A National Workshop on Regularization of ICDS, organized under the banner of the Samyuktha Sangharsh Samiti of Anganwadi Workers and Helpers, in New Delhi on August 21, 2005, had demanded that AWCs should be run as full day centres to help working women; that at least 40 per cent of all funds be allocated for women and children; and that the services of AWWs be regularized in Grade III posts and those of the helpers in Grade IV. Around 10 million signatures were gathered on the memorandum submitted to the government with the above demands.

The AIAWHF conference also stressed that liberalization, privatization and globalization were responsible for the government's continued desire to keep AWWs as contractual, flexible labor. The conference specifically demanded the following: AWWs should be provided with proper service rules, job security, dearness allowance and retirement benefit; attendance at anganwadis should be made compulsory for all children between three and six so that no child is deprived of pre-primary education; anganwadis should be provided the necessary infrastructure and resources to fulfill the above requirements; ICDS should not be administered as a mere scheme, and that it should be upgraded to function under a separate department or directorate.

A very serious problem that needs addressing is the sexual assault that many anganwadi workers complain of. Rape, murder and physical assault of AWWs - often for trying to bring about social reforms - are only too common. The rape of Bhanwari Devi in Rajasthan is still fresh in public memory. Varalakshmi recounts how there was an attempt to molest an AWW in Kunigal district, and how another AWW was murdered in Koppal district of Karnataka

K Sambala, a worker, says, "First of all, officials, sarpanchs and others should stop addressing us as 'Hey, you!' and stop seeing us as easy prey for sexual abuse." Above all, AWWs are fighting for their self-respect.