

15. Policy Advocacy for Education and Healthcare Rights: Govt, NGO and Grassroots Intervention for Women and Children

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Abstract:

This paper examines the critical intersection of policy advocacy for women's and children's rights in the arena of education and healthcare, focusing on the roles played by governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and grassroots interventions. Despite significant global progress in these areas, systemic barriers still hinder equitable access to quality education and healthcare, especially for marginalized women and children in low-income and rural communities. This study highlights the need for integrated policy approaches that leverage the strengths of governmental policies, civil society advocacy, and local grassroots efforts to address these disparities.

It explores how effective collaboration between state and non-state actors can promote inclusive, gender-sensitive policies that prioritize the needs of women and children. By investigating case studies from diverse regions, the paper illustrates successful interventions and identifies challenges in policy implementation, funding, and cultural norms that continue to obstruct progress. The research advocates for a holistic approach to policy advocacy, emphasizing the importance of community-led initiatives and the empowerment of local voices in shaping policies that are culturally relevant and sustainable.

The findings underscore the importance of sustained advocacy efforts at national and international levels to ensure that education and healthcare are not only accessible but also of high quality, with a particular focus on addressing the unique needs of women and children in underserved areas. The paper concludes with recommendations for policymakers, NGOs, and grassroots organizations to strengthen their collaboration and adopt innovative, context-specific strategies to overcome existing barriers and build more resilient and equitable systems for future generations.

Keywords:

Policy advocacy, women's rights, children's rights, education, healthcare.

During the 2018-19 period, the dropout rate for girls averaged 17.3% at the secondary education level and 4.74% at the elementary level¹.

During 2018–19 estimates that there are 38.5 million students enrolled in higher education overall, with 19.6 million of them being boys and 18.9 million being girls².

15.1 Women's and Children's Rights in Education and Healthcare – Policy Framework:

Women and children's rights to education and healthcare are fundamental human rights, guaranteed by the Indian Constitution and various international treaties. Article 21A of the Indian Constitution ensures the right to education for all children aged 6-14 years, while Article 21 guarantees the right to life and personal liberty, which includes the right to health. The right of children to free and compulsory education act³, mandates free and compulsory education for all children in this age group. The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme provides comprehensive services for children up to six years of age, including nutrition, health check-ups, and early childhood education. The Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), launched in 1975, is a comprehensive early childhood development program designed to address the nutritional, health, and developmental needs of young children, pregnant, and lactating mothers. The scheme comprises four key components: Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), Care and Nutrition Counselling, Health Services, and Community Mobilization.

ICDS is a Centrally Sponsored Scheme implemented by the Ministry of Women and Child Development. The Anganwadi Services, a crucial part of ICDS, receive grants-in-aid from the Central government to the States/UTs. The cost-sharing ratio between the Centre and States/UTs varies based on the category of the State/UT⁴.

The primary objectives of ICDS are to:

- 1. Institutionalize essential services:** Implement ICDS in mission mode to prevent undernutrition, strengthen Anganwadi Centers, focus on early childhood care and learning, and promote community-based childcare approaches.
- 2. Enhance capacities:** Strengthen training programs for all functionaries to improve field-level coordination and teamwork. Establish national and state-level training resource centers.
- 3. Ensure inter-sectoral response:** Strengthen partnerships with Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), communities, and civil society organizations to improve child development services. Coordinate with government and non-government organizations providing services for children.

¹ All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), 2018-19. Ministry of Education, Government of India.

² *Supra note.*

³ ACT NO. 35 OF 2009

⁴ District Manual – Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India. <https://darp.gov.in/> Accessed December 5, 2024.

4. **Raise public awareness:** Promote maternal and childcare, nutrition, and health education. Raise awareness about child vulnerabilities and the availability of core services. Encourage social mobilization and voluntary action.
5. **Create a knowledge base:** Strengthen the ICDS Management Information System (MIS) and utilize Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to share information. Undertake research and documentation to improve program effectiveness.

The National Health Mission (NHM) is a flagship program aimed at improving maternal and child health. It focuses on reducing infant and maternal mortality rates and providing essential healthcare services. It is a comprehensive government initiative aimed at improving the health status of the Indian population, especially in rural and urban underserved areas. It was launched in 2013, subsuming the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) and the National Urban Health Mission (NUHM)⁵. The NHM's primary goal is to ensure universal access to equitable, affordable, and quality healthcare services that are responsive to people's needs. To achieve this, it focuses on Health System Strengthening: This component aims to strengthen the healthcare infrastructure, including primary health centers, community health centers, and district hospitals. It focuses on improving the availability of healthcare professionals, medical equipment, and essential drugs and Reproductive, Maternal, Neonatal, Child, and Adolescent Health: This component targets maternal and child health, including reducing infant and maternal mortality rates, promoting family planning, and addressing adolescent health issues. It also focuses on Communicable and Non-Communicable Diseases: This component focuses on preventing and controlling communicable diseases like tuberculosis, malaria, and HIV/AIDS, as well as non-communicable diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.

The NHM has been instrumental in improving healthcare access and outcomes in India. However, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, shortage of healthcare workers, and inequitable access to healthcare persist. To address these challenges, the government has continued to extend the NHM and allocate significant resources to its implementation. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act⁶, prohibits child marriage, which often leads to poor health outcomes for young girls. Despite these legal and policy frameworks, challenges persist in ensuring equitable access to education and healthcare, particularly for marginalized groups. Factors such as gender discrimination, poverty, and lack of awareness hinder progress. Addressing these issues requires sustained efforts from the government, civil society organizations, and communities to create a more just and equitable society.

The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act⁷, is a crucial legislation in India that regulates abortion. It permits termination of pregnancy under specific conditions, such as risk to the woman's health, foetal abnormalities, or pregnancy resulting from rape or incest. The Act outlines the gestational limits for termination and requires the consent of the woman or her guardian. It also stipulates that only registered medical practitioners can perform abortions in registered medical facilities. Over the years, the MTP Act has undergone amendments to

⁵ National Health Mission, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India.

<https://nhm.gov.in/index4.php?lang=1&level=0&linkid=445&lid=38> Accessed December 5, 2024.

⁶ Act No. 6 of 2007.

⁷ Act No. 34 of 1971.

expand the grounds for abortion and make it more accessible to women. While the Act has significantly contributed to reducing maternal mortality and morbidity, challenges like stigma, lack of awareness, and limited access to safe abortion services persist. Efforts are ongoing to improve its implementation and ensure women's access to safe and legal abortion services.

The Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act⁸, is a crucial legislation in India aimed at preventing sex-selective abortions. It regulates prenatal diagnostic techniques and prohibits sex determination of foetuses. The Act mandates registration of diagnostic facilities prohibits disclosure of foetal sex and imposes strict penalties for violations. While the PCPNDT Act has made significant strides in reducing sex-selective abortions, challenges such as illegal sex determination clinics, social biases, and lack of awareness persist. To further strengthen its implementation, it is essential to enhance surveillance, raise awareness, promote gender equality, and improve healthcare infrastructure. By addressing these issues, India can strive for a more equitable and gender-balanced society.

While the government has implemented various policies and acts to improve the lives of women and children, challenges such as inadequate implementation, corruption, and bureaucratic hurdles persist. These issues often hinder the effectiveness of government initiatives. To address these challenges and achieve sustainable impact, collaboration between government, NGOs, and grassroots organizations is crucial. NGOs can play a vital role in monitoring government programs, advocating for policy changes, and providing direct services to marginalized communities. Grassroots organizations, with their deep understanding of local contexts, can complement government efforts by implementing targeted interventions and mobilizing communities. By working together, these actors can create a more effective and equitable system for women and children.

15.2 Government, NGO, and Grassroots Interventions for Women and Children:

A multi-pronged approach involving government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and grassroots initiatives is crucial to address the diverse challenges faced by women and children. Each of these actors plays a distinct role in promoting women's and children's rights, health, and well-being.

Government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and grassroots initiatives play crucial roles in addressing the challenges faced by women and children. Government agencies formulate and implement policies, allocate resources, and provide essential services through programs like Anganwadi Centers, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, and the National Health Mission. NGOs raise awareness, advocate for policy changes, and provide direct services to marginalized communities. They mobilize communities, conduct research, and advocate for evidence-based policymaking. Grassroots organizations, including self-help groups and youth movements, work at the local level to address specific needs,

⁸ Act No. 57 Of 1994.

empower communities, and participate in decision-making processes. Government schemes like Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, Mahila Shakti Kendra, and One-Stop Crisis Centers empower women and address gender-based violence. For children, schemes like Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Mid-Day Meal Scheme, Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, and Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi improve nutrition, education, financial inclusion, and overall well-being. These initiatives, along with various others, contribute to the holistic development of women and children in India. By collaborating, government, NGOs, and grassroots organizations can create a more equitable and just society for women and children, addressing issues like poverty, discrimination, and violence, and ensuring access to rights and opportunities.

NGOs play a crucial role in advocating for women's and children's rights and addressing their needs. They raise awareness about pressing issues like gender-based violence, child marriage, and poor health outcomes. Organizations like UNICEF, Save the Children, and Plan International India actively campaign for policy changes and hold governments accountable. Additionally, NGOs often provide direct services to marginalized communities, including healthcare, education, and counselling. For instance, organizations like CRY, Child Rights and You, and Nanhi Kali focus on child education and empowerment. By mobilizing communities, NGOs empower individuals to participate in decision-making processes and demand their rights. They also conduct research and documentation to highlight the issues faced by women and children, providing evidence-based insights to inform policymaking. Through their tireless efforts, NGOs contribute significantly to improving the lives of women and children in India.

Grassroots interventions play a crucial role in addressing the specific needs of women and children at the local level. Community-Based Organizations work directly within communities to identify and address local challenges. They often focus on issues such as education, healthcare, and economic empowerment. By building strong relationships with community members, these organizations can implement targeted interventions and ensure that resources reach those who need them most. Self-Help Groups (SHGs) empower women economically and socially. These groups provide a platform for women to save money, access credit, and learn new skills. By pooling their resources and sharing knowledge, SHG members can improve their livelihoods and support their families. Youth Movements are a powerful force for social change. Young people can mobilize their peers and advocate for issues that affect them, such as education, health, and gender equality. Youth movements can raise awareness, organize protests, and lobby for policy changes.

15.3 The Power of Integration: A Synergistic Approach to Policy:

An integrated policy approach, which harnesses the combined strength of government, civil society, and grassroots efforts, is essential to address societal disparities effectively. Governments play a crucial role by allocating resources, implementing policies, and creating regulatory frameworks. By investing in public services, social welfare programs, and infrastructure development, governments can directly impact the lives of marginalized communities. Furthermore, they can enact legislation to protect rights, promote equity, and ensure accountability.

Civil society organizations serve as vital intermediaries between the government and the people. They can raise awareness about social issues, advocate for policy changes, and mobilize public opinion. By monitoring government actions, they can hold policymakers accountable and ensure that policies are implemented effectively.

Additionally, civil society organizations can empower communities through capacity building, training, and education, enabling them to participate actively in decision-making processes.

Grassroots efforts, driven by local communities, play a crucial role in addressing specific needs and challenges. By involving community members in the identification of problems and the development of solutions, grassroots initiatives can ensure that interventions are relevant and sustainable. These efforts can also foster social cohesion, build trust, and empower marginalized groups.

When these three actors collaborate, the impact is amplified. Governments can provide the necessary resources and support, civil society can advocate for policy changes and mobilize public opinion, and grassroots organizations can implement programs at the local level. This integrated approach can lead to more effective and equitable outcomes, ultimately contributing to a more just and inclusive society.

15.4 Recommendations:

To effectively address the complex issues related to women and children's rights, it is crucial to foster strong inter-sectoral collaboration. Here are some key recommendations:

Recommendations 1 - Strengthening Policy Frameworks for Education and Healthcare Access:

Governments must prioritize comprehensive policy reforms that focus on improving education and healthcare accessibility, particularly for women and children. These policies should be backed by adequate funding and aimed at reducing barriers such as geographic location, economic status, and social stigma. For education, policies should focus on ensuring that primary and secondary schooling is free, accessible, and of high quality, with an emphasis on gender equality. For healthcare, policies should ensure that maternal health, child immunization, and general paediatric care are universally accessible, even in remote or underserved areas. Governments should also establish clear frameworks for accountability, ensuring that policy implementation is consistent and effectively monitored at local levels.

Recommendations 2 - Promoting Public-Private Partnerships for Enhanced Service Delivery:

To ensure sustainable improvements in education and healthcare, governments should encourage public-private partnerships (PPPs). These collaborations can leverage the strengths of both sectors: government authority and private sector innovation. In education, private companies can support the development of educational materials, digital learning

tools, and infrastructure. In healthcare, partnerships could enhance service delivery in rural areas, provide mobile health units, and support telemedicine initiatives. NGOs and grassroots organizations can act as intermediaries to help ensure that these collaborations prioritize the needs of women and children, ensuring that their voices are integral to the design and implementation of these initiatives.

Recommendations 3 - Engaging Communities through Grassroots Movements and Local Leadership:

Grassroots movements play a crucial role in raising awareness and advocating for the rights of women and children in education and healthcare. Local women's groups, youth organizations, and community leaders are often the most effective agents of change in remote or marginalized communities. Governments and NGOs should invest in building the capacity of these grassroots organizations, providing training, resources, and platforms for them to engage with local policymakers. This bottom-up approach ensures that the policies and services developed are culturally sensitive and truly reflective of the needs and priorities of the communities they are meant to serve. It also fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among local populations.

Recommendations 4 - Addressing Socioeconomic Barriers and Promoting Gender Equality:

One of the most significant barriers to access to education and healthcare for women and children is socioeconomic inequality. Governments and NGOs should work together to eliminate these barriers by providing targeted subsidies, stipends, and social safety nets for families in need. In the education sector, this could mean providing free or subsidized school supplies, uniforms, and transportation for children, especially girls, who are disproportionately affected by such costs. In healthcare, it may involve free or subsidized maternal care, vaccinations, and nutrition programs for children. Special efforts should be made to ensure that women and girls, especially from low-income families, are not excluded from accessing quality services.

Recommendations 5 - Increasing Investment in Digital Education and Telemedicine Infrastructure:

Technological innovations can be transformative in improving access to both education and healthcare, especially in rural or underserved regions. Governments, NGOs, and private organizations should work together to increase investment in digital infrastructure that facilitates remote learning and healthcare delivery. This includes the provision of low-cost devices, internet connectivity, and training for both educators and healthcare providers on how to utilize these tools effectively. Digital platforms can bridge the gap for girls who may face barriers to attending traditional schools and for mothers in remote areas who may not have easy access to healthcare professionals. Governments should ensure that these digital solutions are designed to be inclusive, multilingual, and accessible to people with disabilities.

Recommendations 6 - Improving Maternal Health Services and Childcare Support:

Addressing the specific needs of women and children requires targeted interventions in maternal health and childcare. Governments should work towards expanding maternal health services, ensuring that prenatal care, safe childbirth, and postnatal care are available to all women, particularly in rural areas. Additionally, childcare support should be integrated into public services, providing affordable and quality daycare services for working mothers. NGOs can play a key role in raising awareness about the importance of maternal health and in providing community-based health services and educational programs to encourage healthier practices. Education about safe childbirth, breastfeeding, and early childhood development is vital for improving the overall health and well-being of children in their first five years.

Recommendations 7 - Implementing Comprehensive Child Protection Systems:

A robust child protection system is essential for ensuring that children's rights to education and healthcare are not compromised due to neglect, abuse, or exploitation. Governments must enforce laws and create policies that protect children from harmful practices, including child labor, early marriage, and trafficking. Schools and healthcare facilities should be equipped with mechanisms to identify and support children at risk. NGOs and community-based organizations can assist in raising awareness of child rights and providing counseling services for at-risk children and their families. Furthermore, local leaders and teachers should receive training on identifying signs of abuse and how to respond appropriately to protect children's rights.

Recommendations 8 - Monitoring and Evaluating Policy Impact with a Focus on Gender and Equity:

Regular monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms are essential to ensure that the interventions made in the areas of education and healthcare are achieving their desired outcomes, particularly for women and children. Governments should establish strong M&E frameworks to track not only the overall success of these programs but also how equitably they are serving different demographics. It is essential to disaggregate data by gender, socioeconomic status, disability, and geographic location to identify gaps in service delivery. This information can guide future policy adjustments and ensure that interventions are responsive to emerging needs. NGOs and civil society organizations can play a key role in monitoring these programs and advocating for corrective action when necessary.

Recommendations 9 - Fostering Multisectoral Collaboration for Holistic Approaches:

Addressing the complex challenges related to education and healthcare requires a multisectoral approach that connects the dots between education, health, social protection, gender equality, and economic empowerment. Governments, NGOs, and community organizations should work together to create integrated programs that address the multiple dimensions of women and children's well-being. For example, programs that combine nutrition support, educational materials, and maternal health care could have a more profound impact on improving outcomes for women and children. Collaboration among these sectors can also create synergies, such as linking educational efforts with improved healthcare access, or linking economic empowerment programs for women with improved healthcare for their children. By implementing these recommendations in a coordinated

manner, the government, NGOs, and grassroots organizations can collectively advance the rights of women and children to quality education and healthcare, ultimately contributing to the broader goals of gender equality, social inclusion, and sustainable development.

Recommendations 10 - Strengthen Government-NGO Partnerships:

Strengthening Government-NGO Partnerships is crucial for effective implementation of women and children's rights programs. By encouraging regular dialogue, facilitating joint planning, and establishing mechanisms for co-creating policies, both sectors can leverage their respective strengths and resources to achieve greater impact.

Recommendations 11 - Empower Community-Based Organizations:

Empowering Community-Based Organizations is essential for addressing local needs and ensuring sustainable impact. Providing financial and technical support, facilitating capacity building and training, and encouraging community participation in decision-making can empower communities to take ownership of their development.

By fostering strong inter-sectoral collaboration, we can create a more effective and sustainable system for protecting and promoting the rights of women and children.

15.5 Conclusion:

While India has enacted various laws and policies to protect women and children, their effectiveness is often hindered by several factors. Despite the existence of laws like the POCSO Act and the MTP Act, incidents of child sexual abuse and gender-based violence continue to rise. The implementation of these laws is often hampered by bureaucratic red tape, corruption, and a lack of awareness among the general public. Additionally, societal attitudes and deep-rooted patriarchal norms often undermine the intent of these laws. To truly address these issues, a multi-faceted approach is necessary. Government efforts must be complemented by the active involvement of NGOs and grassroots organizations. NGOs can play a crucial role in raising awareness, providing support services, and advocating for policy changes. Grassroots organizations can empower communities, especially marginalized groups, to demand their rights and participate in decision-making processes. By working together, the government, NGOs, and grassroots organizations can create a more effective and equitable system for women and children.