

Is early childhood care a right? [IN] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Childcare is a problem most working mothers face.

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It is 6 'o' clock in the morning. Pramila breaks from her sleep and begins her household chores. She mops, cleans, washes utensils and cooks. She readies her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter Bindu, and is all set to leave home.

At 9 am, she walks fast with a bag slung to her shoulder and her kid in arms. She is almost breathless. She has to reach her workplace at 9:15 am, which is the punching time.

After entering the work premises, she leaves her daughter in the baby room and begins her work. Pramila, who is 22 years, works in a garment factory at Nayandahalli, as a helper. Her husband Kumar works in a factory that makes iron racks. After finishing the day's work at 5:45 pm, she fetches her kid and rushes back home. This is the daily routine of Pramila, one among the thousands of women garment workers in the city, who juggle between work and home, with their children's childcare constantly weighing on their minds.

Pramila has been working in the garment factory for the past one-and-a-half years. Though her daughter Bindu was earlier left in the care of her grandmother back in Pandupura, for the past seven months she is being taken care of at the crèche in the garment factory.

Though Pramila is quite happy with the crèche facility at the factory, she is worried about her child's day care after she completes three years. Children above three years are not taken care of at the factory crèche.

"Employers should hire a teacher at the crèche, who can instill learning habits among them. Moreover, the upper age limit needs to be increased to five years," observed Pramila.

The Indian garment industry consists predominantly of first generation women workers. According to a preliminary survey conducted by Samvada, an NGO, taking 10 garment factories with 300 women as its sample size, it was found that the women in the industry worked from 8:30 am to 5:30 pm on a general basis. Also, that 30 women in the sample size were married and their children required childcare and were below seven years of age.

Only a small percentage of the workers' children were sent to factory crèches, where the conditions are appalling, said Benson Issac of Samvada. Samvada is an NGO interested in promoting crèches as an entitlement for women and children. It has partnered with the Karnataka State Council for Child Welfare (KSCCW) in refining their training programme so that balasevikas or crèche workers can begin to see themselves as women entrepreneurs and crèches as a right.

Good early childhood care can be made a reality only when pressure is laid on employers, buyers and government bodies, observed Benson. Crèches run by the private sector have a profit motive and are primarily a response to the market forces. These crèches are unregulated as there is no government intervention. Also, as a majority of childcare happens in informal arrangements there is not much data available on them, underlined Dr Archana Mehendale, an independent researcher.

However, some of the issues that need to be addressed in the domain of crèches are inadequate coverage, lack of funds, poor enforcement, lack of infrastructure, etc. In the 2000-05 Union budget 2.35% was spent on children, of which 1.5% was spent on their education, 0.45% on child development, 0.4% on child health and 0.03% on child protection. A clear indication that a lot more resources need to be spent on childcare and development.

What is the age group that calls for childcare and development? How can crèches be made more inclusive? What is the ideal location for crèches? These are some of the issues that need to be dealt with in detail, adds Dr Archana Mehendale.

"The first thing that struck me on visiting a construction site in Bangalore, way back in 1983, was the malnutrition among children. Moreover, Bangalore, though a fastest growing city, was not exposed to the idea of mobile crèches," recounted Nomita Chandy of Ashraya. Ashraya has been running crèches at construction sites for some years now.

One of the greatest challenges encountered while running crèches on construction sites is the migratory nature of labourers. As labourers

represent a population from all over India, narrowing down on one medium of instruction at creches becomes difficult. Thus, greater emphasis is laid on play and learning materials like blocks, she observed.

Most importantly, it is the right of the young children to be cared and protected. Moreover, day care as a concept is more than providing mere custody of children. Thus, the onus now lays on crèches, which are typically centres that provide pre-school education and day care to young children, to contribute to their development, marked Dr Archana.

As the distinction between early childhood care and pre-school education in India is not clear, the policy directives on the provision of child care services is obscure. However, there are several legal documents which recognise the importance of childcare and the role of the State in providing childcare support and services, she said.

"There is no mapping of the crèches being run in the country. Also, there is no monitoring agency to regulate their functioning. Moreover, there is a need to have an ECC Board, so that seminars can be held and various issues relating to early childhood care can be discussed. Also, lack of dialogue between the various agencies involved in ECC is a major hindrance in the implementation of the ECC programme," informed Nina Nayak of KSCCW.

- reprinted from the Deccan Herald

Region: Asia ^[2]

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