

## Aspirations and Challenges of Mothers of Marginalized Early Years Children: Reflections from Bhopal City, India

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### Abstract

*Global policies and research accept the significance of early years learning and care for children. This paper explores mothers' aspirations and challenges in caring for and educating marginalised early years children in the Indian city of Bhopal. The article examines children's care, safety, and living conditions by presenting the views of mothers whose children attend fee-free non-government and government organization-run ECCE centers. The idea of school readiness has also been elicited from the perspective of participant mothers. The data reveals the structural inequality embedded in accessing quality primary care and early literacy opportunities for marginalised children in India.*

**Keywords:** care and education, early years children, early childhood care and education

### Introduction

The significance of care and education in early childhood years is globally recognised as an enabling foundation for a child's physical, cognitive, and social development. The holistic and integrated program of nutrition, health, and early childhood education, which highlights the all-round development of a child from prenatal age to 6-8 years, is understood as Early Childhood Development or Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) program in India (Kaul and Sankar, p.34, 2017). Focusing on care and early learning, the National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy, 2013 highlighted that children should be best cared for by their families and communities. Multiple models of ECCE delivery, like *aanganwadi* centers, crèches, playgroups, playschools, nursery schools, kindergartens, preparatory schools, *balwadis*, or home-based care are adopted in the Indian context

to provide care and education to children from diverse backgrounds. Care and education are integrated in such a way that discussing one and ignoring the other seems like a superficial way of understanding child development.

In the care and education sector, in all public, private, and non-governmental spaces, females are primarily involved; and mothers of children are deeply engaged in caring and early learning of the children. Remarkably, when questions of care and education arise in academia, the voice of mothers of children is often silenced. Their work at home has been regarded as unpaid labor for years, and women as a group are regarded as disadvantaged to men in pay and in the condition under which they labor (Apple, 1989, p.55). Importantly socio-economic and disadvantaged background mothers have hardly listened on the care and education of their early years children.

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Therefore, the paper aims to explore mothers' aspirations and challenges in the care and education of their children.

## The context

The researcher conducted her study at three fee-free ECCE centers in Bhopal city. The data was collected from a Government's Integrated Child Development Services run *aanganwadi* center, a Non-Government Organization that runs the *balwadi* for Pardhi children in the urban slum, and a Non-Government Organization run Child Care and Learning Center (CCLC) for children of migrant laborers at a construction site. Data was collected over a period of ten months and in two phases (the first phase of data collection was from December 2019 to February 2020; the second phase of data collection was from December 2020 to April 2021). The researcher interviewed mothers of children and did informal interactions with *aanganwadi*, *balwadi*, and CCLC supervisors, *aanganwadi* workers and volunteer workers. Interviews and informal interactions with all the respondents were conducted in Hindi language and translated into English language.

## Methodology

The case study method has been used to explore the mothers' aspirations and challenges in the care and education of their children in their early years. For triangulation, the researcher added informal conversations with all ECCE center supervisors, *aanganwadi* workers, and volunteer teachers. Being an exploratory case study focusing on a few participants from the north Indian city of Bhopal, the findings cannot be generalised. Eighteen mothers participated in the study. The informal interactions with supervisors and volunteer teachers/*aanganwadi* worker on the challenges children and families face in accessing ECCE centers are also presented in the paper. All semi-structured interviews/ interactions were recorded and noted in the Hindi language. Later these

were transcribed, translated into English, and coded by the researcher. The researcher identified key emergent themes elicited from the empirical data. These are as follows:

### 1. Care, safety, and living condition of children

All children who attend *aanganwadi* lives in pakka houses. The *aanganwadi* center is run in pakka room. The *aanganwadi* center and children's houses were in the same locality. Most families knew each other, and the children were visible to mothers while playing in a *galli* or lanes with children of similar age groups. Mothers of *aanganwadi*-going children reflected that they are primary caretakers of children and they do not work outside their houses. Mothers of children shared that their children are safe at the *aanganwadi* center. When children are at *aanganwadi*, mothers visit them and sometimes sit with them and feed them. In the *aanganwadi* center toilet facility is available but *aanganwadi* worker and helper keeps it closed because with the use of children, it will get dirty, and officials come for a visit any time. They added that if officials find the toilet dirty, then they scold the *aanganwadi* worker and helper. *Aanganwadi* helper keeps the room neat and clean and ensures all children have washed their hands and eaten food.

A mother of a child shared that, at the *aanganwadi* center, the most vital thing is children learn to eat together. *Aanganwadi* worker shared that many children do not eat food at home but eat when they come to the center. Some mothers added that during the COVID-19 pandemic, children were at home, so many of them lost interest in eating food at home. As a result, children lose their weight considerably. They emphasised that in *aanganwadi*, children developed a habit of eating together. *Aanganwadi* worker emphasised that in *aanganwadi* she told children to eat properly, sit properly, and wash their hands before eating. She teaches children how to eat with a spoon. If children

eat big bites, then she used to tell them to have small bites. For instance, a mother of a child shared she feels so relaxed because of *aanganwadi* center. As she shared,

*Krishna eats from aanganwadi ... I pack his lunch for the school also (Krishna goes to the aanganwadi centre and a school). I am relaxed and I focus on sending him off to school. I have no worries of feeding him in the morning. (p.13, Int, 2021)*

Children who attend *balwadi* center live in semi-*kachcha-pakka*-type homes. The children are from Pardhi community and labelled as de-notified tribal (DNT) family's children. They live in an urban slum. Their home has only one or a maximum of two small compartmentalized rooms. The roof of the houses was made of a tin shed, or a plastic cover was visible to cover the rooms. The houses were tiny and connected to *kachcha-pakka* asymmetrical narrow lanes. Children and families generally sit in narrow lanes/galli in the locality. The narrow lane/galli of houses were connected to the main road. On the road Honda showroom, Khadims, Reliance trends, Morena Gajak, and many other showrooms were present. The *balwadi* center was in the neighborhood, run in a small *pakka* room. Toilet facilities are not available, but volunteer teacher distribute puffed rice, chick pea, bhel to children every day. As the center runs in a slum, pigs and dogs roam around, and children play in the same locality.

According to mothers of *balwadi* children, children are safe at the *balwadi* center because children and families know each other. *Balwadi* volunteer teacher stays in the same locality; therefore, she is very much aware of the challenges of children in accessing primary care and education. The volunteer teacher takes care of the children when children come to the *balwadi* center. She used to say to children, "Go home, wear a frock and shirt, and come, show me your nail, go home, wash your face, and come". She also advises the elder brothers and sisters to clean their younger ones. The vignette written below depicts one such instance,

*Bhariri, focus on your sister too. You wash the hands and legs of your sister and see how her hand, leg, and face is. This girl was very beautiful. Her mother used to send her to balwadi in a proper way. Now her father's both kidneys are damaged, and her mother is doing only hospital-hospital and unable to concentrate on her. (26 Feb 2020, p.2, line no. 72-75)*

The volunteer teacher emphasised that many children go for rag picking with their parents. She added that if any crime is reported in the nearby area, the police comes and enquires about the parents of the Pardhi community. Children used to go to fairs and *yatras* of festivals like *Shivratri*, *Navratri*, *Ganesha utsav* to collect food and money.

Child Care and Learning Center (CCLC)-going children live in *jhuggis* at the construction site with their parents. Their *jhuggis* are made up of tin sheds, and families shift *jhuggi* frequently from one location to another in the construction site. A few parents who work at construction sites have their homes in villages. Mothers' of CCLC children expressed that the children are unsafe at the construction site. CCLC does not have proper safety measures for children; lifts are yet to be constructed, and the stairs are rickety. There was no toilet or sanitation facility at the center. The center was running in a room full of concrete dust and waste, and there were no proper seating arrangements for children or volunteer teachers. CCLC was running on the third floor of the tower, and it was difficult and unsafe for children to climb the stairs to attend the center. Mothers of children added that at construction sites, children roam here and there, and construction waste and other metals cause frequent physical injuries to the children. As mentioned above, the stairs did not have handrails and were full of dust, stones, soil, and other concrete items, creating life-threatening conditions for children while climbing stairs.

Toddlers urinate on the sitting mat, which dries and later children sit on the same carpet. The researcher observed children playing and sitting mainly in this stinking,

unhygienic atmosphere. The volunteer teacher shared that during the COVID -19 pandemic, many CCLCs were closed because of funding crisis. She added that this CCLC is running because the owners pay her salary. She and her supervisor opined owners of construction sites must support the center with more funding. However, the volunteer teacher shares her fear that if she demands more support from the owners, they may close the CCLC immediately. The volunteer teacher expressed that if this center closes, mothers and children will be at risk in terms of some safety of children and support to mothers. On the safety of children, a mother of a child shared,

*I always think about my children's safety because construction work always continues. When children come to the garden, then I feel safe. If children are in front of my eye, then I feel they are safe otherwise, here, at this site, there is no safety. Wherever you see, you will find stones, sand, or raw materials, and big vehicles also come because of construction work. These children go to 'school' (mothers call CCLC school) here. The 'school' (CCLC) is also unsafe for our children. There are no doors, and it is in an apartment on the third floor. There are lifts, space for lifts is also open, and work is ongoing. Lifts are open; no cloth, tin, or teepa (tin) covers them. Now electricity work is going on there. If the madam (volunteer teacher at CCLC) does not watch over the children carefully, if she remains careless, then there is a danger to the children. (CCLC\_C5Rani)*

The fathers of *aanganwadi*-going children work as security guards for night guard duty, tailor work, sales jobs, or fourth-class employees in a government office. Mothers of *aanganwadi*-going children perform household chores like cooking, cleaning, washing, and caring for their children. Most of the mothers and fathers of *aanganwadi*-going children got the opportunity to access school. Families of *balwadi* children went for rag picking; some were small-scale scrap dealers. Children who attend *balwadi*, their family members, including children, were earning members in most families. In

groups, *balwadi* children go to the market, *yatras*, and temple during the festival, and they collect scraps and make enough money to feed family members. In a few families, elderly members work like gardening, cleaning, or sitting in a small gumti (tiny shop). Most of the parents of *balwadi*-going children do not get the opportunity to access school. The pressure of earning and household responsibilities are high on mothers of *balwadi*-going children; therefore, it is difficult for them to take care of children. While mentioning socio-economic conditions and the role of children at home, mothers of *balwadi*-going children responded,

*We are from Asthang. Asthang is near to Sehore. We are staying here for 20 -25 years. We speak Pardhi language at home. We use handcarts for employment. We go for rag picking also, children also go with us. (Balwadi\_C1\_Twinkle)*

*We go for rag picking and selling every day. We cannot sit at home. If we sit idle, then who will feed us? (Balwadi\_C4\_Roshi)*

Children attending CCLC are children from migrant families. Their parents and other family members migrated to work as laborers at the construction site. While parents work on the construction site, the children attend CCLC. The mother, father, and other family members are daily wage laborers. Mothers of migrant children shared that they are usually paid less than their husbands and other male members at the construction site. Mothers of children added that most of the male members drink alcohol, snatch money, and hit them and younger ones. At *jhuggis*, CCLC-going children are involved in cleaning, taking care of siblings, and sometimes going to earn with their parents. Girl children perform caring roles and homemaking responsibilities, whereas boys are indifferent towards caring and house-making activities. For instance, in the case of Purva, who is six years old and attends CCLC, her mother responded that she finds it challenging to take care of Purva. However, Purva supports her family by doing household chores and she care for her younger siblings.



*Purva generally wakes up with me early morning at 6 o'clock. She brings water at home; she fills the water and then brushes her teeth. After that, she prepares herself to go to 'school' [CCLC], and come to 'school' [CCLC]. She likes 'school' here; during lunch she only cooks food, cleans utensils, and takes care of her younger brother. There is a lot of work at home, so she does maximum work at home. (CCLC\_C1\_Purva)*

Mothers of *aanganwadi*-going children can read and write in Hindi; a few can read and write a few words in English. All mothers of *aanganwadi*-going children got the opportunity to access school, and most of the mothers are intermediate. Mothers responded that they have time to teach their children at home too. They said their primary responsibility is to care for the child, house, and other family members. Mothers of *balwadi* and CCLC-going children did not get an opportunity to access school; most were illiterate. Only three mothers of *balwadi*-going children went to school but did not remember that they studied and married early in life. They shared that their husbands are literate, but that is up to grade three, five, or, maximum eighth grade. Mothers of all three ECCE-going children emphasised that male members cannot care for the children because they think cleaning and caring for children is not their work. Mothers of *balwadi* and CCLC-going children reflected that they do not have enough time to care for their children because of work pressure. In poor economic conditions, mothers are forced to work at home and outside the house without support from family members and society.

The findings from this section highlighted that families struggle to provide primary care, safety, and healthy living conditions to their children. The participants shared their everyday struggle to feed their family members. Most of the *balwadi* and CCLC mothers were struggling to feed their children, and most of them expressed their deep concern about not being able to give enough time to their children. *Aanganwadi*-going children were in a better position compared to *balwadi* children and children attending CCLC. But

for this, mothers are doing hard and unpaid labor at home, and historically, this work is considered natural for women. All the children in *balwadi* and CCLC, experience extreme poverty in their life. Moreover, they live in unsafe environments. The findings show a need for care-based programs with education to support families and children, particularly children from migrant and most disadvantaged families.

## 2. The idea of school readiness and experience of ECCE

UNICEF (2012) specifies school readiness in three aspects — children's readiness for school, school's readiness for children, and families' and communities' readiness for school (Kaul, and Bhattacharjea, 2019). Further, it is seen as, "the state of child competencies at the time of school entry that is important for later success" (Snow 2006, p.9). Though school readiness has been seen as the preparation of a child, school, and family, it is the yardstick for a child's future learning. Regarding readying children for school, most mothers in all three ECCE centers accepted that sending children to *aanganwadi*, *balwadi*, and CCLC is limited to preparing their children to sit in the school. They added that going to *aanganwadi*, *balwadi*, and CCLC-oriented children to stay at the center without a mother is helpful for school-going. But *balwadi* and CCLC-going children's mothers were unsure about sending children to school. According to them, if children are mature enough to earn, it is better to send them to work as it will help their family financially. Further, they added children above six years old could help them bring money home. Children go for rag picking, fairs, and temples to beg.

Mothers of the *aanganwadi*-going children were interested in sending their children to school. They were particularly interested in sending them to private schools because they believe that private schools maintain an environment of the English language. Further, they added that government school teachers are not smart as well as children

come from low economic profile families. Mothers of aanganwadi-going children stressed the need for private schooling because they firmly believe that government schools are of no-use to their children. They believe that children's education in private schools will make them independent. They shared that increased price/inflation can be seen everywhere, so education is necessary for a child to get a good job or earn well. A mother of a 5-year-old child has shared that during COVID -19 pandemic, she arranged a private tutor for her child. She added that her child is going to a private tutor for online classes; he performed well in online exams and understood classes better. As she responded,

*My child has enrolled in school during lockdown also. He is studying online, and I am sending him to coaching for online school study. Recently, Krish was giving online papers, so he is going to coaching for that. Madam in coaching helps him in giving an online paper. Therefore, now I am paying 200 rupees for coaching and 250 rupees for school per month... I feel that if he is not going to school, then he should go to coaching. Coaching madam helps him in online school education... (Aanganwadi\_E5\_KS)*

Mothers of *balwadi*-going children are unsure about sending their children to school. Their concern is that children cannot earn for the family once they start attending school. The opportunities are hardly available for the girl child due to the caring and house-making responsibilities. While asking about sending a child to school, the mother responded that she is uncertain about when and how to enroll children in school:

*Now all the children are grown up, two have started going to work also. They have not studied anything from the beginning; now which year I should send my child to study? We are unable to send them to school, and what they will study; they did not start studying from the beginning; what will they study now, they should earn now? (Balwadi\_EC2\_Nitin)*

Some mothers added that sending a child to school and a learning center is good, but

they are doubtful about continuing their education. They also shared the challenges of their life,

*Their age children are going...right? From my heart, I want to send my children to school, but how? I cannot, it is difficult for me. Their father is no more, he knew a few things. Now I do not remember anything to teach them. I do not know anything to make them learn. I can only try to send them to school when I have some support. (Balwadi\_E4\_Roshni)*

The supervisor of the CCLC shared a similar observation in the case of migrant children. He shared, "when children's hands and legs become strong, they go to work and earn for the family. Girl children mostly take care of their home and younger siblings and get married in the early thirteen or fourteen years of age". It was also observed that at CCLC, children learn to write '0' and '1' on the slate in the initial few days, and children of different age groups were writing '0' and '1'. The supervisor of CCLC responded that children are not trained to move their hands according to letters or numbers, so children learn to write only '0' and '1' in the first few days. The supervisor also shared that most families of children migrate from one construction site to another. The families return to work either at the same or another construction site. Because of this migration from one location to another, there is no continuity of learning. Children forget what they learned when they come back to the CCLC. They start learning to write '0' and '1' and forget because of learning disruption. Therefore, children of different age groups were seen to practice and write '0' and '1' at the CCLC.

Some mothers of *balwadi* and CCLC-going children shared the experience of sending their children to school. In most cases, children could not adjust to the school environment. A mother of a migrant child responded that she enrolled her child in a government school in the village, but the child did not stay because the teacher started beating him. She said that his child went to school for 6 to 7 days, then stopped

because he was uncomfortable in the school environment. She shared that her child is continuously going to 'school' (CCLC) at the construction site because he has friends from his 'background' here, "*bachche hain na iske mail ke, yaha iska mann lag jata hai*" (children are there of his background, so he adjust there).

Mothers at *balwadi* center and CCLC shared their concerns about not being literate enough to teach their children. They added about the financial pressure on the families and the inability to bear the cost of schooling. In the case of *balwadi* and CCLC-going children, the idea of school readiness of families and children needs to be looked at critically because it is connected with the livelihood challenges of the families. The experience and opinions of the participants prove that the socio-economic challenges of the families and communities deter them from participating in school. Socio-economic and disadvantaged conditions prevent children and families from accessing schooling. The finding highlights the need for schools to become inclusive spaces for all children. Schools must not push the child out of school by signifying them as unfit children from lower socio-economic and disadvantaged families. Hence, we should ask questions about the readiness of the education system, especially the nature of schools that are not ready to accommodate marginalised children. In the case of disadvantaged children, the primary focus should be on improving the family's socio-economic conditions so that children's care and safety are assured. Further, we also need to think about and prepare ECCE programs concerning the socio-economic background of the families, mainly focusing on the everyday challenge and struggle of mothers and volunteer teachers in caring for marginalised early years children.

## Concluding remarks

Many psychologists and educationists have highlighted that survival, protection, health, nutrition, psychosocial, physical, and emotional development are essential

to address the all-around development of a child. Numerous early childhood practitioners give importance to research that has highlighted that to gain skills for greater brain development, it is necessary for children to attend high-quality ECCE programmes (Love, Harrison, Sagi-Schwartz, Van Ijzendoorn, Ross, Ungerer, Chazan-cohen 2003; Early Childhood Care and Education, NCF Position Paper, 2006; Chopra 2012; Kaul and Shankar, 2017). However, the study shows that attending or accessing high-quality ECCE programs greatly depends on the children's and their family's social and economic capital. This study advocates that the social and economic capital in the form of parents' occupation, salary, literacy, and immediate living conditions plays a significant role in providing/withholding primary care and education of children.

The study indicates that a child is not free from the social, cultural, or economic orientation of the family and the neighborhood. In three ECCE contexts, children experience diverse care and education opportunities that depend greatly on their family's socio-economical obstacles or opportunities. The study also provides insight into the understanding of the social and cultural milieu of children and families, focusing on opportunities provided by the state to the families. The mothers are trying their best to send their children to school but are struggling with livelihood issues which make children devoid of appropriate care and a learning environment.

The participants' experience in the study proves society's collective failure in addressing children's care and education-related issues in a disadvantaged context. Scholars rightly observe that the well-being of children, and providing a protective and caring environment is a shared responsibility of societies and families (Madan, Srinivasan, and Pandya cited in Saraswathi, Menon, and Madan, 2018, p.126). This study demands justice and right-based development discourse (Sriprakash, Maithreyi, Kumar, Sinha, and Prabha, 2020, p.19), which

must emphasise the need for programs and policies to rethink/rework for the structural inequality in families of children. Therefore, the study concludes that justice and right-based discourse could be a way to provide better care and education facilities for all children.

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