



The State's First Face: On-the-ground insights into our Anganwadi worker

Editorial feature

Tucked inside a densely populated low-income settlement, is a one-room Anganwadi centre that has quietly shaped children's futures since 1996. At its centre is Shashikala (Name changed), now in her early 50s, who has worked as an Anganwadi worker (AWW) for over three decades. Her day begins with cleaning the centre alongside her helper, preparing meals, comforting toddlers, and meticulously documenting everything from immunisations, nutrition, growth monitoring, stimulation, ration distribution along with early childhood education.

This article traces her journey, not as a one-off story, but as a window into the state of India's frontline early childhood services. Her everyday labour speaks volumes about how much we ask of Anganwadi workers (AWWs), and how little we give her in return.



Beyond duties: The expanding role of a frontline worker

Shashikala began her career in 1991, at the age of 20, armed with an SSLC certificate from her village school. At first, she thought her role was limited to caring for children under six. Over time, that role grew encompassing food distribution, health referrals, parent counselling, and running a preschool. After her marriage, she moved to the city, and in 1996 was transferred to her present Anganwadi centre, where she has worked ever since.

When she first joined, home births were common, and food distribution often led to conflict. “People would argue why I couldn’t give food to everyone. They didn’t know the rules,” she recalls. Slowly, through mothers’ meetings and door-to-door visits, she built awareness about breastfeeding, immunisation, and nutrition. Her helper, who came from the same community, became both an ally and an emotional anchor.

Facilities were basic. A leaky roof, poor ventilation, and the lingering stench from a nearby public toilet made the centre hard to run, especially during the rains. When the LPG stove arrived, it felt like a breakthrough. Until then, she and her helper had cooked with firewood, often coughing through the smoke.

Despite these conditions, Shashikala ran preschool activities every day. She made do with limited supplies and often brought materials from home. “The ₹80 contingency amount couldn’t cover the basic needs of my Anganwadi,” she laughs. NGOs and community donations helped occasionally, but for the most part, she ran the centre with patience and improvisation.

Over the years, she has seen the centre evolve. More mothers now visit hospitals, immunisation coverage has improved, and early marriage rates have declined. “Girls are finishing PUC now,” she says proudly. She regularly hosts Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) days, nutrition weeks, and *Seemantha* programmes to involve parents and build awareness. Some of her former students now hold regular jobs and some still return to thank her.

In the community, she’s known as *akka* (older sister). Mothers turn to her for everything from breastfeeding advice to ration queries. Shashikala’s story is not an exception it is the rule. Across India’s 1.3 million Anganwadi centres, women like her carry on their backs, the burden of India’s early childhood care system.



What Shashikala's story reveals about the system?

An expanding role, shrinking recognition

Shashikala began her job at INR 250 a month. Today, she earns INR 12,000, but is still officially labelled a honorary worker. In practice, she functions as a teacher, social worker, nutrition assistant, and government data collector. She runs a preschool, tracks growth charts, coordinates health check-ups, submits digital reports, and mobilises families for government schemes. Yet, her job continues to be treated as low-paying work.

This contradiction lies at the heart of the system: a professional expectation without professional recognition. As focus on ECCE deepens, the gap between what is demanded and what is supported only widens.

Digitisation without digital support

Shashikala now updates data on the Poshan Tracker, calculates rations, and uploads applications online. But poor connectivity and outdated systems make this a constant challenge. Instead of easing her workload, technology has often added new pressures especially with the multiple datasets that must be uploaded regularly.

In recent years, real-time monitoring through mobile apps and digital dashboards has become a priority. Yet many frontline workers are expected to make this shift without data allowances and reliable internet access. As a result, data entry can take up much of the day, reducing the time available for direct work with children.



Community anchor

Shashikala is the State’s most visible representative in a vulnerable settlement. She mentors new recruits, clarifies misconceptions about government schemes, and bridges cultural and institutional gaps, work that is deeply relational, ongoing, and often invisible to those who design the very policies she delivers.

Shashikala considers herself fortunate to have a supportive supervisor and Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) who are proactive, responsive, and help her access resources and resolve operational challenges—support that many of her peers in the country may not have.

Still, the absence of formal recognition remains, adding to the weight of her responsibilities.

What this means for policy?

Shashikala’s story is not just personal, it reveals deeper structural gaps that must be addressed for ECCE reforms to take root.

Recognise AWWs as professionals who play a vital role in delivering early education, monitoring child health, distributing nutrition, and connecting communities with the State. Yet they are legally classified as “honorary workers,” paid an honorarium below minimum wage, with no career path, limited or no retirement benefits, or institutional respect.

This disconnect between expectations and recognition is unjust and counterproductive. They should be formally recognised as early childhood professionals with wages that reflect their responsibilities, clear career progression pathways, social protection, health insurance, and the full range of benefits due to any government sector worker alongside opportunities for ongoing professional development.



Invest in real, not just digital infrastructure

Building Anganwadis should not stop at apps and dashboards. Safe buildings, clean toilets, kitchen facilities, and quality materials are foundational. Digital tools must be designed with workers, not just for monitoring compliance.

There is a need to review and rationalise data collection requirements from AWWs through the Poshan Tracker. The review should eliminate duplication, reduce non-essential reporting, and align data collection with actionable needs, especially for monitoring ECCE. Where feasible, data currently collected daily should be shifted to monthly or quarterly reporting, and physical register

requirements removed where digital records suffice. Streamlining these processes will reduce administrative burden on AWWs, enabling them to dedicate more time to ECCE activities.

Streamline duties, prioritise ECCE

AWWs core role is care and education. Non-essential surveys, election duties, and cascading reporting requirements should be reduced. Their time must be protected for what matters most: engaging young children and supporting mothers.

MWCD and States/UTs should limit AWWs responsibilities to their core functions in ECCE and other Anganwadi-related services. Additional tasks, such as data collection or surveys for other departments, should be assigned to alternative personnel such as women SHG members, retired AWWs, retired teachers, or college students to ensure AWWs can focus on their primary duties.

Create feedback loops from the ground up

In monthly meetings, set aside a few minutes for workers to share what's working and what isn't, e.g., from shortages in food supply to app glitches. The supervisors can record recurring issues and pass them up for action. Even small changes such as fixing supply delays or simplifying app steps shows feedback leads to action. Reducing redundant tasks, like repeated photo uploads and form filing, sends a clear message: their time and judgment are valued.

Strengthen capacity building and ongoing support

Most training for AWWs is one-off and uneven, with little follow-up or mentoring. To improve ECCE quality, AWWs need regular, curriculum-aligned training, access to quality learning materials, and sustained pedagogic support.



Ongoing mentorship through cluster meetings, peer learning, or in-person visits can help translate training into daily practice. Workers like Shashikala hold rich, practical knowledge. Policy must create forums for them to inform programme design, share local ideas that work and flag implementation challenges. This is essential for system learning.

States/UTs should provide all AWWs with access to ECCE certification, as per NEP 2020 - six months for 12th pass and twelve months for 10th pass qualifications. Training should be modular, delivered in a blended format with monthly one-day in-person sessions, and fully funded, including fees and related costs. This will enhance the professional standing of AWWs and strengthen ECCE delivery.

Fill supervisory vacancies to support the AWC teachers

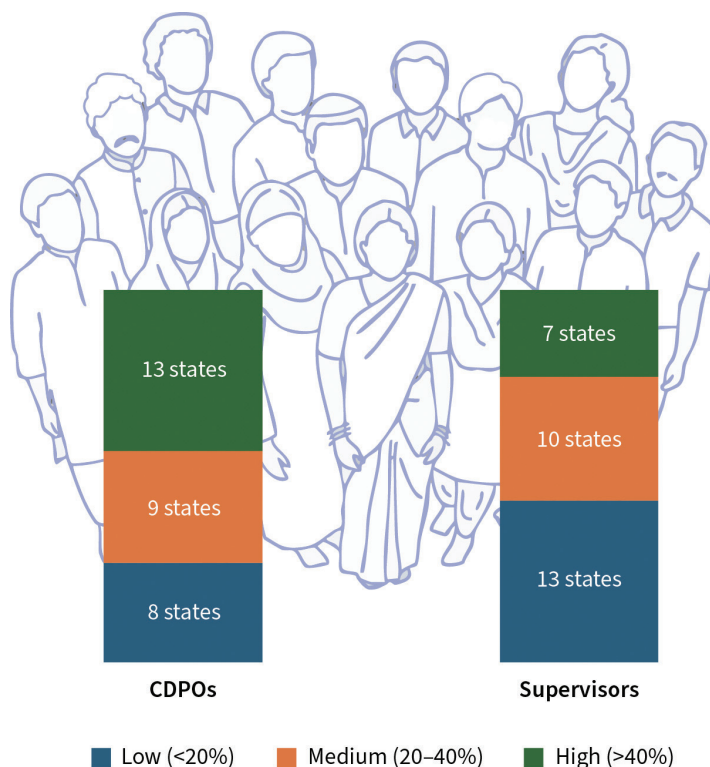
In several States, there are significant vacancies—particularly among CDPOs and

Supervisors that must be filled on priority. In many locations, the vacancy levels for these posts are very high. These positions are essential for guiding Anganwadi workers, delivering training, and providing ongoing field support functions that are critical for effective ECCE rollout in Anganwadis.

Conclusion

Shashikala doesn't speak in policy terms. But her work embodies the principles of early childhood development, health equity, and gender justice. She adapts, improvises, and holds together the last-mile delivery of one of India's largest social programmes. The system runs because she shows up and does her work. If we want to lay a strong foundation for India's future, we must begin where the children are, i.e., in the one-room centres run by women like Shashikala. And that means seeing, supporting, and standing with the AWW who has held the system together all this time.

Percentage of vacancies among CDPOs and Supervisors across States.



Source: Evaluation of ICDS Scheme of India, Niti Aayog (2020)