



Role of ICDS in Women's Empowerment: A Study of Bisra Block, Sundargarh District, Odisha

Miss Sasmita Minz¹

Dr. Pragyant Mohanty²

1. Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Social work, KISS Deemed to be University, Bhubaneswar - 751024, Odisha, India
2. Associate Professor & Dean Dr. Pragyant Mohanty, KISS Deemed to be University, Bhubaneswar - 751024, Odisha, India

Abstract

Women's empowerment is essential for achieving sustainable development, especially in rural areas where socio-economic challenges restrict women's access to education, healthcare, and financial independence. The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), launched in 1975, has been a key initiative in tackling these issues by providing vital health, nutrition, and education services to women and children. This study explores the role of ICDS in empowering women in the Bisra Block of Sundargarh District, Odisha, by evaluating its impact on health, education, economic participation, and social awareness. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines primary data from surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions with ICDS beneficiaries and stakeholders, alongside secondary data from government reports and academic studies. The findings show significant improvements in maternal and child health, higher institutional delivery rates, enhanced nutritional awareness, and increased financial independence through Self-Help Groups (SHGs). However, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, a shortage of trained personnel, and socio-cultural barriers remain, limiting the full potential of ICDS programs. Despite these obstacles, the study emphasizes the positive correlation between ICDS interventions and women's empowerment, highlighting the need for stronger policy implementation, increased community participation, and improvements in infrastructure. By addressing these challenges, ICDS can further help reduce gender disparities and promote inclusive socio-economic development. The study concludes that a collaborative effort among government agencies, community organizations, and local stakeholders is crucial for ensuring the long-term success of women's empowerment initiatives in rural India.

Key words: Economic Independence, Health and Nutrition, ICDS, Women Empowerment.

Introduction

Women empowerment is a fundamental aspect of sustainable development, ensuring that women have equal opportunities to participate in economic, social, and political spheres. It involves providing women with the necessary resources, skills, and opportunities to become self-reliant and actively contribute to their families and communities. Women's empowerment is closely linked to improved health, education, economic independence, and overall societal progress.

In India, various government initiatives have been implemented to bridge gender disparities and enhance women's socio-economic status. One of the most significant programs addressing these issues is the **Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)**. Launched in 1975, the ICDS scheme is one of the world's largest and most comprehensive programs for early childhood care and development. ICDS aims to improve the nutritional and health status of women and children while fostering early childhood education and maternal care. By offering essential services such as supplementary nutrition, immunization, health check-ups, and preschool education, at the heart of this initiative are Anganwadi centers, which act as grassroots hubs for delivering these services. ICDS plays a pivotal role in promoting gender equality and empowering women in rural areas.

In the **Bisra Block of Sundargarh District, Odisha**, ICDS has been instrumental in uplifting women by providing essential health, nutrition, and education services. The region, characterized by socio-economic challenges, has witnessed notable improvements in women's participation in community development programs, maternal health indicators, and financial independence through self-help groups (SHGs). This study aims to analyze the role of ICDS in empowering women in the Bisra Block, highlighting its successes, challenges, and areas for further improvement.

Meaning of Women Empowerment

Women empowerment in the context of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) refers to improving the health, nutritional awareness, educational knowledge, and decision-making capacity of women through welfare services provided by the programme. ICDS, launched in 1975, is a major government initiative aimed at supporting pregnant women, lactating mothers, and children below six years of age, especially in rural and tribal areas.

Through Anganwadi Centres, women receive services such as supplementary nutrition, health check-ups, immunization support, nutrition and health education, and counselling on maternal and child care. These services help women become more aware of balanced diet, hygiene, child development, and healthcare practices. As a result, they are better equipped to take informed decisions regarding their own health and the well-being of their children.

In the ICDS context, empowerment also includes increasing women's confidence, participation in family matters, and involvement in community activities. By gaining knowledge and access to support services,

women become more self-reliant and socially active. Thus, ICDS not only contributes to improving maternal and child health but also strengthens the social and psychological position of women. Therefore, women empowerment under ICDS means enabling women to become informed, confident, and active participants in family and community development.

Importance of ICDS

The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is one of the most important welfare programmes launched by the Government of India for the development of children and women. It plays a vital role in improving the health, nutrition, and early education of children below six years of age. The programme also supports pregnant and lactating mothers by providing supplementary nutrition, immunization support, health check-ups, and nutrition education. These services help in reducing malnutrition, child mortality, and health-related problems among women and children.

ICDS is also important for women's empowerment, especially in rural and tribal areas. Through Anganwadi Centres, women receive awareness about maternal health, hygiene, childcare, and balanced diet. This increases their knowledge, confidence, and decision-making ability within the family. Thus, ICDS contributes significantly to both child development and the social, health, and educational empowerment of women.

The Role of ICDS in Empowering Women

Improved Nutritional and Health Outcomes:

Improved nutritional and health outcomes are evident among women and children due to the effective functioning of Anganwadi centres under the Integrated Child Development Services. Most women reported better health as they received supplementary nutrition, regular health check-ups, and guidance on childcare practices. These services helped in early detection and prevention of health issues. Children benefited through improved growth monitoring, immunization support, and nutritious food, which significantly reduced malnutrition levels. Overall, ICDS interventions have played a crucial role in strengthening maternal and child health, especially in economically and socially vulnerable communities.

Increased Awareness and Education:

Women participating in the Integrated Child Development Services have shown increased awareness of maternal health, child care, and hygiene practices. Educational sessions conducted at Anganwadi centres play a vital role in spreading knowledge about nutrition, sanitation, breastfeeding, and reproductive health. This improved understanding enables women to adopt healthier behaviors, ensure better care for their children, and make informed decisions, ultimately enhancing their overall well-being and family health outcomes.

Economic Empowerment through SHGs:

Economic empowerment has improved among women involved in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) linked with the Integrated Child Development Services. Many reported greater financial independence as they received training, skill development, and support to start small-scale businesses. These income-generating activities have enhanced their earning capacity, strengthened decision-making power within households, and contributed to better economic stability and improved living conditions for their families.

Higher Institutional Delivery Rates:

The study shows a notable increase in institutional deliveries due to the efforts of the Integrated Child Development Services. Through Anganwadi centres, pregnant women receive regular check-ups, counselling, and awareness about safe motherhood practices. This encourages them to choose hospital deliveries over home births. As a result, risks during childbirth are reduced, leading to lower maternal and infant mortality rates and improved overall maternal and child health outcomes.

ICDS Schemes

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Literature Review

Several studies have examined the impact of ICDS on women empowerment and child development in rural areas. Research conducted by **Sharma and Gupta's 2018** study investigates the impact of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) on maternal and child health outcomes in India. The research reveals that regions with active ICDS programs exhibit lower rates of severe malnutrition among children compared to areas without such interventions. Additionally, the study highlights improvements in maternal health indicators, attributing these positive changes to services like supplementary nutrition, immunization, and health education provided by ICDS. The authors emphasize the need for strengthening infrastructure and training within the ICDS framework to further enhance its effectiveness in promoting maternal and child health.

Patel, Sharma, and Gupta's (2020) The study, "Empowering Rural Women through ICDS: A Study on Socioeconomic Development," examines the role of India's Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) in promoting economic self-sufficiency among rural women. The authors highlight how ICDS facilitates the formation of self-help groups (SHGs) and offers skill development initiatives, enabling women to engage in income-generating activities. Through qualitative and quantitative analyses, the study demonstrates that participation in SHGs leads to improved financial independence, decision-making power, and social status among rural women. The authors also identify challenges such as limited access to markets and financial resources, suggesting that enhancing infrastructure and providing targeted support can further strengthen the impact of ICDS on women's empowerment in rural areas.

Saxena (2019) critically examines the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program in India, acknowledging its success in addressing child malnutrition but highlighting significant challenges that impede its effectiveness. The study identifies infrastructural issues, such as inadequate facilities and resources, and social barriers, including socioeconomic inequalities and lack of community engagement, as key obstacles. Saxena advocates for a shift from a center-based to an outreach-based approach, focusing on children under two years old, to enhance the program's impact. The article also cautions against the provision of packaged food due to its unpopularity among young children and associated corruption.

Kadun, P. B., & Thippesh, K. (2014). It investigates the impact of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme on women's empowerment in Shikaripura Taluk, Shimoga District, Karnataka. Employing a descriptive research method, the authors analyze the role of ICDS in empowering women through various programs such as Stree Shakti, Kishori Shakti Yojana, SABALA, and Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahayog Yojana (IGMSY). The study highlights that 299 Anganwadi centers operate in Shikaripura Taluk, serving a population of 245,249 as of November 2013. The authors present detailed demographic data, including the distribution of beneficiaries like children aged 0-6 years, pregnant women, lactating mothers, and adolescent girls across different social categories. While the study provides comprehensive statistical insights into ICDS's reach, it lacks qualitative analysis on the actual empowerment outcomes for women. Future research could benefit from incorporating personal narratives and case studies to better understand the scheme's effectiveness in fostering women's empowerment.

Lal, S., & Paul, D. (2003). The Indian Journal of Community Medicine discusses the imperative of universalizing the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) in India. The authors emphasize the need for expanding ICDS coverage to ensure that all eligible beneficiaries, particularly children and women, receive essential health, nutrition, and early education services. They highlight the challenges faced in achieving universalization, such as infrastructural limitations, resource constraints, and socio-economic disparities. The editorial calls for strategic policy interventions, enhanced resource allocation, and community participation to overcome these challenges and strengthen the ICDS framework. By advocating for a more inclusive and effective ICDS, Lal and Paul underscore its critical role in improving child survival, growth, and development across India.

Kumar, G. (2023). "Empowering Rural Communities through Integrated Child Development Services: A Comprehensive Analysis" examines the impact of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) on rural communities. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data to assess the effectiveness of ICDS initiatives in promoting holistic child development. Findings indicate significant improvements in nutritional outcomes, early childhood education, and healthcare access among rural populations. The research also highlights challenges such as infrastructural limitations and socio-economic disparities that hinder optimal implementation. Kumar emphasizes the importance of community engagement and local governance in enhancing the efficacy of ICDS programs, suggesting that active participation and tailored strategies are crucial for empowering rural communities and ensuring sustainable development.

K. Prasanna's (2016) The article, "Women Empowerment and Major Initiative in India," delves into the multifaceted concept of social justice, emphasizing its social, economic, and political dimensions. The paper underscores the importance of equal opportunities and participation for women in various spheres, highlighting the Indian Constitution's provisions that promote gender equality. Prasanna traces the evolution of women's empowerment initiatives in India, noting a paradigm shift from welfare-oriented approaches to development-focused strategies, particularly from the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78) onwards. The article also discusses significant government measures aimed at uplifting women's status, reflecting on the progress made and the challenges that persist in achieving true gender parity.

Ratna, P. J. (2021) The article, "Role of District Women and Child Development Agency (DWCD) in Empowering Women in Visakhapatnam," Ratna and Rao examine the impact of DWCD's initiatives on women's empowerment in Visakhapatnam district, Andhra Pradesh. The authors highlight various schemes implemented by the agency, including the Supplementary Nutrition Programme (SNP) under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), which provides health services, nutrition, and education to children up to six years old, pregnant women, and lactating mothers. They also discuss the Sampoorna Poshana and Sampoorna Poshana Plus programs, aiming to supply nutritious food to beneficiaries, and the extensive network of Anganwadi Centers offering healthcare, nutrition education, and preschool activities. Despite these efforts, the study identifies challenges such as inadequate basic amenities in Anganwadi Centers, including insufficient drinking water, washrooms, and electricity. The authors suggest that addressing these infrastructural gaps is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of DWCD's programs and achieving true empowerment for women in the region.

Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the impact of ICDS programs on women's health, education, and economic empowerment in the Bisra Block of Sundargarh District.
2. To identify the challenges and suggest improvements for enhancing the effectiveness of ICDS initiatives in empowering women.

Role of Anganwadi Centres

Anganwadi Centres play a crucial role in **delivering services** under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) at the grassroots level. Anganwadi workers ensure the effective delivery of essential services such as supplementary nutrition, health check-ups, immunization support, and pre-school education. They regularly monitor the growth of children, maintain records, and coordinate with health staff to provide timely care to pregnant and lactating mothers. Through these services, they contribute significantly to improving the health and nutritional status of women and children.

In addition, Anganwadi workers actively conduct **counselling and awareness programmes** to educate women about maternal health, balanced diet, hygiene, breastfeeding practices, and child care. They organize meetings, home visits, and community sessions to spread awareness about government schemes and healthy practices. This helps women become more informed, confident, and capable of making decisions related to their health and family welfare, thereby promoting women's empowerment at the community level.

Challenges in implementation

The effective implementation of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme faces several challenges at the ground level. One major issue is the **irregular delivery of services**, such as inconsistent supply of supplementary nutrition and interruptions in health check-ups or pre-school activities. This affects the continuity and effectiveness of the programme, especially in rural and tribal areas.

Another significant challenge is the **lack of awareness among beneficiaries**, particularly women, about the full range of services provided under ICDS. Due to low literacy levels and limited outreach, many women are unable to utilize these services properly. Additionally, **infrastructural issues** such as poorly maintained Anganwadi Centres, shortage of space, lack of basic facilities like clean water, sanitation, and teaching materials further hinder service delivery. These challenges reduce the overall impact of ICDS and highlight the need for better planning, awareness campaigns, and infrastructure development.

Methods of the Study

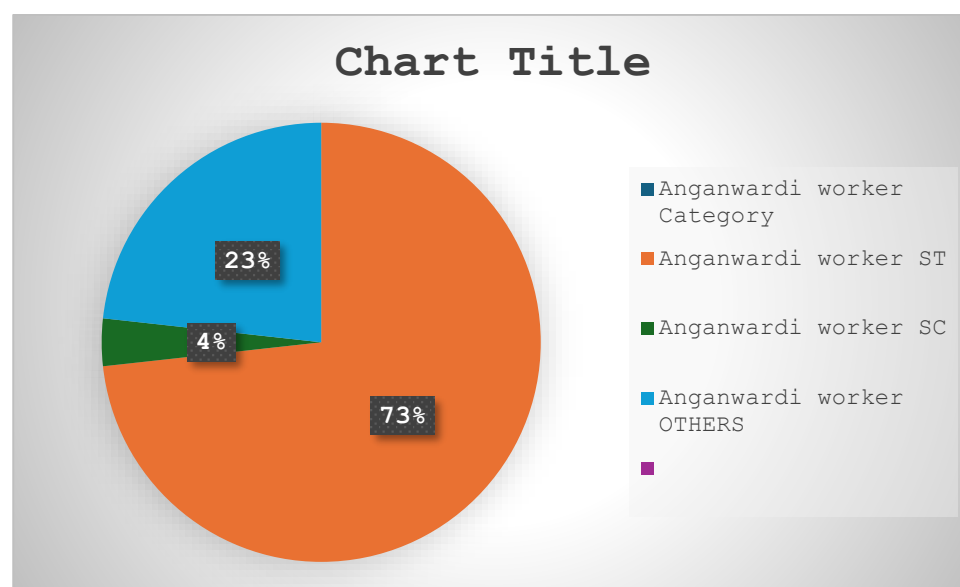
This study employs a mixed-methods approach to assess the role of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) in empowering women in the Bisra Block of Sundargarh District, Odisha. A sample of Anganwadi workers and women beneficiaries was selected for the study. Primary data was collected through structured surveys, semi-structured interviews with stakeholders like government officials and ICDS functionaries, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with women participants to explore their experiences and challenges. Secondary data sources included government reports, policy documents, academic research, and statistical data to evaluate program effectiveness. Quantitative analysis was conducted using statistical tools to assess trends in maternal health, financial independence, and nutrition. Qualitative insights were derived through thematic analysis of interviews and FGDs. Additionally, a

comparative study with similar rural districts identified best practices and highlighted areas for policy improvement. This comprehensive approach provided an in-depth understanding of ICDS's impact on women's empowerment in the region.

Finding and discussion

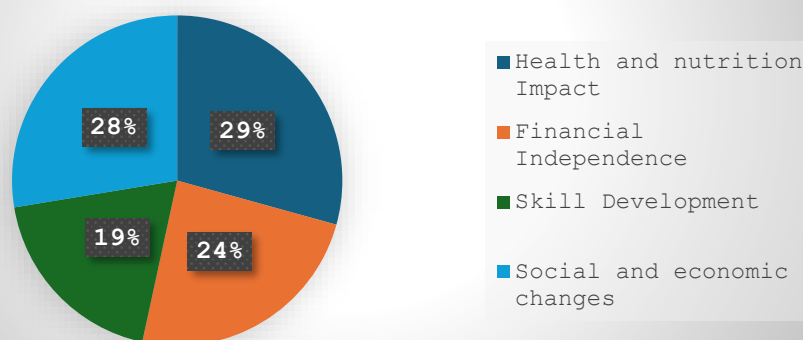
The study reveals several key insights into the impact of ICDS on women empowerment in the Bisra Block of Sundargarh District:

Analysis of Anganwadi Worker Category Distribution



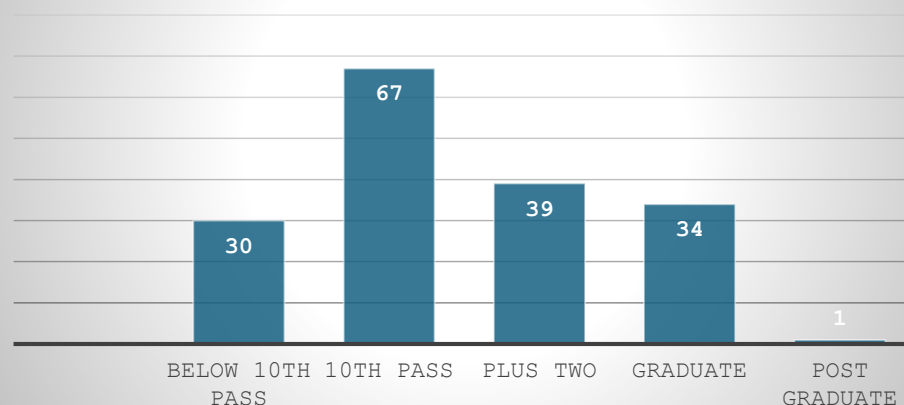
The distribution of Anganwadi workers highlights that **73%** belong to the **Scheduled Tribes (ST)** category, reflecting strong representation and active participation from tribal communities, which is crucial for effective outreach in these areas. However, only **4%** of workers are from the **Scheduled Castes (SC)** category, indicating limited engagement that may stem from lower education levels, fewer opportunities, or limited outreach efforts. Meanwhile, **23%** of workers fall under the **'Other'** categories, including general and other backward classes (OBCs), showcasing broader inclusivity within the ICDS program. These insights suggest the need for more targeted initiatives to enhance participation from underrepresented groups, ensuring equitable service delivery and strengthening community empowerment.

Impact of ICDS service on women empowerment



The impact of ICDS services on women's empowerment is significant across various dimensions. Health and nutrition improvements were observed by 85% of workers, highlighting the effectiveness of initiatives like nutrition support, immunization, and health check-ups in reducing malnutrition and enhancing women's health. In terms of financial independence, 70% of workers acknowledged that participation in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) under ICDS programs has provided women with income-generating opportunities, boosting their economic status. Additionally, 55% of respondents emphasized the role of ICDS in skill development through training in areas like tailoring, handicrafts, and microfinance, fostering self-reliance. Furthermore, 80% of workers noted positive social and economic changes, with increased women's participation in decision-making processes within households and communities, signifying a progressive shift in empowerment and social dynamics.

Anganwardi workers Qualification



The educational qualifications of Anganwadi workers in the Bisra Block show a diverse range. The majority, **67 workers**, have completed education up to the **10th grade**, making secondary education the most common qualification. **39 workers** have attained **higher secondary (plus two)** education, indicating a moderate level of advanced learning. Additionally, **34 workers** hold **graduate degrees**, reflecting a good level of educational attainment that can enhance the quality-of-service delivery. However, **30 workers** have education levels **below the 10th grade**, which may impact their capacity to effectively

deliver certain services. Only **1 worker** possesses a **postgraduate qualification**, highlighting limited access to higher education within this workforce. This data suggests the need for continuous training and capacity-building initiatives to strengthen the overall effectiveness of the ICDS program.

Tabular Analysis of Challenges, Support Needs, and Roles in ICDS Implementation

Category	Details	Percentage/ Observation	Analysis
Challenges	Infrastructure issues	60%	Poor infrastructure, including lack of basic facilities in Anganwadi centers, hampers service quality.
	Lack of awareness	50%	Many women are unaware of ICDS services, reducing participation and program effectiveness.
	Resource shortages	40%	Insufficient availability of nutritional supplies and educational resources affects service delivery.
Support Needed	More government funding	Suggested by workers	Increased funding is essential for improving infrastructure and ensuring consistent service delivery.
	Better training for Anganwadi workers	Suggested by workers	Regular training can enhance worker skills, ensuring better service implementation.
	Increased community involvement	Suggested by workers	Engaging communities can improve awareness and participation in ICDS initiatives.
Government & Community Role	Need for public-private partnerships	65%	Collaborations with private entities can enhance resource availability and program outreach.
	Awareness programs for effective implementation	65%	Conducting awareness campaigns will ensure better understanding and utilization of ICDS services.

Conclusion

The **Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)** has been instrumental in fostering women's empowerment in the Bisra Block of Sundargarh District by significantly improving their health, educational awareness, and economic status. Through various services such as supplementary nutrition, health check-ups, immunization, pre-school education, and awareness programmes conducted through Anganwadi Centres, women have become more conscious of their own health as well as the well-being of their children. This has contributed to better maternal and child health outcomes and increased confidence among women in making decisions related to family welfare.

In addition, ICDS has played an important role in enhancing educational awareness among women, especially regarding nutrition, hygiene, childcare, and the importance of early childhood education. Such awareness has helped women become more informed and active participants in both household and community-level decisions. The programme has also contributed to their economic empowerment by creating employment opportunities for local women as Anganwadi Workers and Helpers, thereby improving their financial independence and social status.

However, certain challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of resources, irregular service delivery, and low awareness in remote tribal areas still need to be addressed. By strengthening the implementation of ICDS and ensuring effective monitoring, the programme can further contribute to reducing gender disparities and building a more equitable society.

A collaborative approach involving government support, community participation, and social awareness is essential for the holistic development of women in the region. Empowered women not only strengthen their families but also play a vital role in nation-building and sustainable development.

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