

CAPSTONE PROJECT



Exploring the Impact of Monitoring and Evaluation Systems on Early Childhood Care and Education in India: A case study of Anganwadi Workers in Maharashtra

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Submitted by: Ms Sae Walkikar (MPP Cohort: 2024-26)

Under the Supervision of: Dr. Vasudha Katju, Assistant Professor at Kautilya School of Public Policy

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Exploring the Impact of Monitoring and Evaluation Systems on Early Childhood Care and Education in India: A case study of Anganwadi Workers in Maharashtra

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**Saee Walkikar
2024019324**

**Under the Supervision of
Dr. Vasudha Katju
Assistant Professor**



**Kautilya School of Public Policy,
Gandhi Institute of Technology and Management
(Deemed to be University)
Rudraram, Telangana 502329
4th April, 2026**

SELF-DECLARATION

This is to certify that the thesis titled “Exploring the Impact of Monitoring and Evaluation Systems on Early Childhood Care and Education in India: A case study of Anganwadi Workers in Maharashtra” is my original work and has not previously formed the basis for the award of any Degree, Diploma, Associateship or Fellowship to this or any other University.

Saeed Walkikar

4/4/2026

CERTIFICATE OF THE SUPERVISOR

This is to certify that the thesis titled "Exploring the Impact of Monitoring and Evaluation Systems on Early Childhood Care and Education in India: A case study of Anganwadi Workers in Maharashtra" is original work undertaken by Saeed Walkikar under my supervision and guidance as part of his/her Master's degree in this Institute. The thesis may be sent for evaluation.

Vasudha Katju
Supervisor's Signature

Dr Vasudha Katju

4/4/2026

Assistant Professor

Kautilya School of Public Policy

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Abstract

Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) are central to delivering Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services in India, yet their work is increasingly shaped by Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems. This study examines how these systems affect AWWs' roles and service delivery. Based on qualitative interviews with AWWs and Supervisors in Maharashtra, conducted during ongoing worker protests, the study highlights the everyday realities of frontline implementation.

Findings show that ECCE delivery is dominated by administrative and data-related tasks, reinforced by weak infrastructure, ambiguous goals, and metric-based accountability. This creates a disconnect between AWWs' perceived roles as educators and their routine clerical responsibilities. In response, workers adopt coping strategies such as overtime work and informal data practices.

The study argues that M&E systems function primarily as tools of state performance rather than program improvement, and calls for greater frontline discretion and context-sensitive design to enhance ECCE outcomes.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

Introduction

Human capital development is the foundation on which a nation rises. A healthy, well-nourished and well-adjusted individual is equipped to lead a fulfilling life. Moreover, they are likely to reach their potential and contribute to society in a meaningful way. This creates returns for the society in which they function. It creates positive externalities that flow to the environment around the individual. This human capital is created by investing in the individual's health, skills, knowledge and abilities. Everything that makes an individual capable of achieving what they may want to.

Human capital creation is a function of Early Childhood Development (ECD). Studies have found that quality ECD has positively influenced school readiness. Components of school readiness include language and literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills. School readiness then further influences their performance in school and later stages of development. ECD is also tied to wider outcomes like reduced child maltreatment and crime. Lastly, with respect to capital development, ECD has demonstrated cost effectiveness in terms of reduced cost of later remediation and treatment and increasing social benefits (Reynolds et al., 2010).

The first six years of a child's life are said to last a lifetime. Over 85% of their brain development happens during this period (NEP, 2020). This period presents the greatest opportunity as well as the greatest risk to influencing their life. During this time, the child requires good nutrition. Along with that, they require stimulation of various mental and physical faculties. The six developmental domains of a child include physical, cognitive, linguistic, cultural/creative, social and emotional. They all need to be given deliberate attention during the first six years of the child's life, for them to develop in a healthy manner.

Deprivation of these crucial components of a child's development, can have a detrimental impact on the lives they lead. Inadequate nutrition, high levels of stress and adversity, poor health and living conditions and lack of early education affects brain architecture. It increases the likelihood of stress-related diseases and cognitive impairment during their adult years. Children that come from troubled backgrounds experience additional challenges in their school and further education. They enter with fewer skills and hence may experience lower confidence later in life. This is particularly significant for developing countries like India. 11.5% of Indian children live in extreme poverty. This creates unfavourable conditions for the healthy growth of children (Down To Earth, 2023). Health data shows that 32.9% Indian children under five years of age are stunted and 18.7% of them are wasted (Concern Worldwide & Welthungerhilfe, 2023). Moreover, a lack of early childhood development could create a population that is not sufficiently productive or employable, vulnerable to political radicalization and prone to crime.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) refers to the provision of these services to the child. The primary components of ECCE are health and education. Nutrition includes the provision of nutritious food that the child requires for healthy development of the body and the mind. Education refers to pre-school education provided to enhance the six developmental domains of the child. Both activities combined, should help children become healthy, active and self-confident. This involves a number of caregiving and educational activities like nutrition, growth monitoring, play-based learning, vaccinations, etc.

ECCE policies in India are primarily implemented through Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) who form the frontline of policy implementation. They perform multiple childcare functions in their communities. These functions cover domains of health and nutrition for both women and children in the village. They serve as teachers, healthcare workers as well as mentors for the

women and children. However, a common topic of discourse in this domain is the issue of AWWs having to perform additional administrative tasks and clerical work.

Background of ECCE and ICDS in India

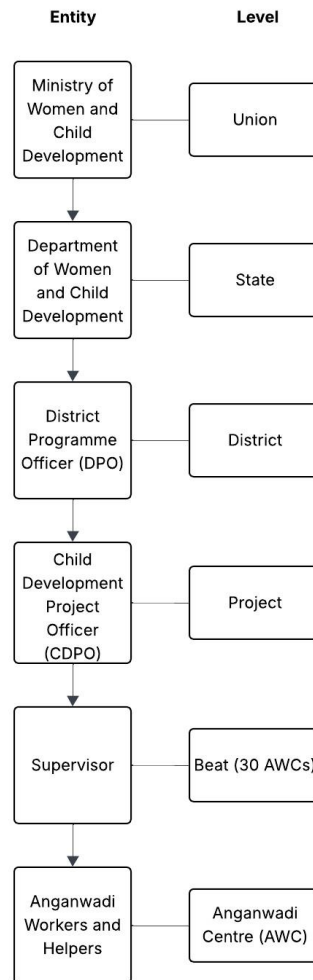
Some of the earliest ECCE values can be found in the cultural heritage of India. Indian scriptures indicate an attitude of ‘lalayaat’ or indulgence of childhood impulses for the children. Traditionally, parents, grandparents and other family members engaged in ECCE activities by imbibing values and helping the child engage in growth activities. Child-raising was a shared responsibility among the family and community. With economic growth and social change, family structures and the way society organizes itself has changed. Moreover, increase in employment and other kind of responsibilities on the parents created a need for organized ECCE in India (Kaul et al., 2009).

The earliest and most prominent ECCE policy in India is Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). It was conceptualized when India adopted a comprehensive policy called National Policy for Children in 1974. Introduced in 1975, it was positioned as a holistic intervention to bring nutrition, health and Early Childhood Education (ECE) services to children below the age of six. It was initially a centrally funded scheme meant to combat the prevailing problem of malnutrition in India. However, it has evolved into a comprehensive policy that covers multiple domains of childcare. It covers the entire life cycle of child development, from the mother’s health until the child enters school. The beneficiaries covered under ICDS are adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and children aged 0-6 years. The programme provides a large range of services:

- Supplementary nutrition (Hot cooked meals and Take Home Ration)
- Vitamin A, Iron and folic acid tablets

- Immunization
- Health check ups
- Treatment of minor ailments
- Referral services
- Non-formal education on health and nutrition to women
- Preschool education to children between 3-6 years of age
- Convergence of other supportive services like water, sanitation etc

For implementation of ICDS, the government has established a large network of ECCE centres called Anganwadi Centres (AWCs). These are run by Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) and their helpers. India currently has 14,03,152 AWCs and where ECCE activities are conducted by 13,36,552 AWWs (Ministry of Women and Child Development, n.d.). These centres are run under the jurisdiction of Ministry of Women and Child Development. They are operated by the state Department of Women and Child Development. At the district level, ICDS implementation is supervised by District Programme Officers (DPOs), and at the project level, by Child Development Project Officers (CDPOs). Supervisors, who manage one beat/circle (consisting of about 30 AWCs), report to CDPOs. Hence, a hierarchy was established for the implementation of ICDS throughout the country (Figure 1). However, ICDS implementation channels are currently being used for all Women and Child Development schemes in India.

Figure 1*ICDS Hierarchy*

Other ECCE policies in India include the National Policy on Children (2013), National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy (2013), National Plan of Action for Children (2016), Mid-Day Meal Scheme (1995), Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram, Integrated Child Protection Scheme (2009), and Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (2018). Aside from this ECCE also found a notable presence the 12th Five Year Plan and most recently, New Education Policy 2020 (Rahaman et al., 2024). All of these policies are a manifestation of the developmental ideology of the post-colonial era. They were also a result of the influence that international organizations like

United Nations and World Bank had on national policies at the time (Deshpande, 2019).

ICDS is the oldest and most comprehensive policy governing ECCE in India. However, it is important to note that before the early 2000s, it functioned as a targeted programme with specific coverage norms. It is after 2005 that it took off after the Supreme Court of India universalized ICDS services due to a public interest litigation in 2001. It re-conceptualized ICDS from a child rights lens, making ECCE services into legal entitlements. After the Supreme Court order, all states were directed to set up a service delivery unit (AWC) in every settlement. Moreover, an independent monitoring system was set up to ensure compliance of the orders (Deshpande, 2019). Due to its prominence in the ECCE domain and decades long presence, this paper might use ICDS as an umbrella term for all ECCE activities and services.

Multiple evaluative studies have been conducted in different Indian states to understand the effectiveness of ICDS. Some recurrent challenges found in the literature were lack of infrastructure like toilets, electricity or even solid buildings, and low access to remote areas (Panda, 2021; Malla et al., 2024; Vadlakonda et al., 2025). However, there are region-wise variations in the effectiveness of ICDS. A study in Hyderabad concluded that along with investing in infrastructure, the government should invest in capacity building of the AWWs. It also found that reducing their workload will be important for ECD activities to thrive in the AWCs (Malla et al., 2024). Another study in Assam found that along these challenges, Lakhimpur was facing low beneficiary enrolment. It also found that enrolment in AWCs was influenced by competition by private educational institutions and their proximity to primary schools (Paul et al., 2025). In some tribal areas of Telangana, a lack of access to quality nutrition has led to low health outcomes for children (Vadlakonda et al., 2025). On the other hand, similar studies have found that ICDS has significantly reduced malnutrition in India. Awareness about

the scheme among parents is high and they are willing to send children to AWCs (Panda, 2021). However, this was also found to have varied effects among states. States having robust governance and high economic development have reduced malnutrition rates whereas states having poor governance like Bihar, Jharkhand and Assam showed consistent numbers of malnourished children (Kumbhakar et al., 2024). It was also found that AWCs are perceived as meal centres. A shift in this perception is necessary in giving due importance to ECE activities.

A number of factors influence the effectiveness of ICDS, found through methodical studies. The difference in nutrition outcomes among states characterized with ‘good governance’ and economic development proves that these factors significantly influence the status of ECCE in a state. Hence, ECCE interventions should be specific to the political and economic context of the state (Kumbhakar et al., 2024). Community participation in ECCE activities conducted in the AWC, is influenced by awareness among the beneficiaries, caste disparities and systemic weaknesses. Infrastructure of the AWCs was found to be key in bringing participation from the community (Madhanagopal, 2023).

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Review of Literature

ECCE outcomes are tied to a number of factors associated with effectiveness and some challenges that create bottlenecks in implementation. First challenge is that ECE is not receiving sufficient attention. AWWs are burdened with extra work that takes away from time they might give to educational activities for the children. The average AWW spends 38 minutes on ECE activities which is less than the scheduled two hours. Second challenge presented in the article is thoughtful optimization of resources. Resources that are put into the ECCE system are being misallocated. For example, large chunks of the budget are spent on things like production of teacher-learning material (beads, puzzles, playing blocks, etc.), which goes underutilized most of the time. On the other hand, many supervisor positions remain vacant creating a gap in oversight. Third, there is less focus on equipping the parents to engage the children in early learning activities, which is crucial in sustaining the gains of the state ECE activities (Miranda, 2025). Further operational challenges found were found by Chathukulam and Joseph (2025). Corruption in the form of manipulated food records and poor food quality has plagued the system for decades. There is a prominent urban-rural divide in the implementation outcomes. It was reported that out of every 100 beneficiaries in India, only seven are in urban areas. There is insufficient support from Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI). This is a challenge because AWCs often rely on PRIs for functions like finding and securing a space, funding, discussion in meetings, etc (Chathukulam & Joseph, 2025).

Multiple researchers have focused their work on the implementers of ECCE policies. Regular trainings for AWWs and focusing on strengthening their theoretical understanding of the work they do, would significantly improve service delivery. Similarly, reducing their workload

will help them focus on ECD activities making the AWC more beneficial for the children (Malla et al., 2024b).

AWWs are also not given due dignity and fair working conditions (Chathukulam & Joseph, 2025). A study in Uttar Pradesh found that most AWWs in the state had moderate to high job involvement. It was found to be linked to income, education and experience. A time-use study conducted in Andhra Pradesh found that on average, 39.34 % of the day was spent on preschool work, 14.68% of the day was spent on supplementary nutrition, 17% of the time was spent on paperwork/data entry and 12.98% was spent on personal work. However, most of the ECE activities were observed to be unstructured and random. They were not catering to the developmental domains of the children (Centre for Research in Schemes and Policies, 2025). Another, similar study in Madhya Pradesh found that AWWs spent substantial amounts of time on administrative tasks like data entry and filling out paper registers. Additionally, this study explored the influence of education on AWWs successfully spending the expected amount of time on various tasks. It was found that a higher level of education enables them to carry out administrative tasks more effectively (Jain et al., 2020). A field visit by George (2025) in Raichur's AWCs revealed that not just AWWs but also supervisors were burdened by data entry into the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems created by the state. "Everyone has pressure, even our seniors. But somewhere, we've lost the point. This was supposed to be about supporting mothers and children. Now it's a numbers game." (George, 2025).

New Public Management (NPM) is a public administration concept, that borrows ideas from business management. It focuses on improving efficiency of the public sector through performance-based management techniques. It uses data to administer public services and advocates for meticulous collection and use of data. To govern the performance of public sector

workers, NPM advocates for the establishment of comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems. NPM is reflective of Max Weber's ideas of bureaucracy and rationalization of public sector management. His system relies on surveillance and information control to ensure efficiency in the public sector. However, literature in the social sciences has criticized NPM in multiple ways (Abdullahi, 2024).

James Scott, in 'Seeing Like a State', discussed how M&E systems that stem from NPM principles fail to serve the stated purpose for which they are established. He scrutinizes the concept of measurement. Measurement in public sector implies measuring society which, according to him is a question that is impossible to solve. "Society must be remade before it can be the object of quantification". He discusses how the state uses measurement to reduce complex, local phenomena to one-dimensional metrics. The mental filter required to do this, according to Scott, is provided by the political interests of the state that may have nothing to do with the public problem they are solving (Scott, 2017).

Systems of bureaucracy like M&E systems can be both challenges as well as opportunities for social groups to configure and re-configure hierarchies, creating a disjuncture between development policies and practice. Deshpande (2019) attempts to form a non-normative understanding of the concept of governance and how ICDS program implementation translates to reality. She mentions literature that attributes implementation gaps to the social embeddedness of the Indian state. This is explained by the phenomenon of the state being a collection of interest groups protecting their interests. To understand how such state practices are carried out by state functionaries, she conducted a long-term anthropological study in Maharashtra. She found that state functionaries from dominant castes used the bureaucracy to perform and reinforce existing caste structures through exclusion of lower caste beneficiaries. However, she also found that

Dalit ICDS functionaries resisted these practices by invoking Weberian principles of the bureaucratic structure. “The intersection of local caste politics with everyday state practices reproduced dominance and exclusion and thereby gaps between policy and practice, but also created spaces for confrontation, resistance, competing imaginaries and the reconstitution of politics, practices and boundaries.” (Deshpande, 2019). These nuances, she argues highlight the gap between policy formulation and practice.

Her study also highlights the multitude of contexts in which policies function and how these contexts influence the manner in which the policy manifests into reality. This causes ‘improvisations’ in program delivery. This improvisation occurs because frontline workers must ensure that it appears on paper, as if program rules are being practiced as expected. This ‘improvisation’ also occurs primarily through the M&E systems of data collection. She found AWWs manipulating health and nutrition data. However, her study also found the conflicting idea that AWWs need to perform for their community. The AWWs also displayed sincerity in reporting undernourished children in her village. This finding diverged from existing literature on frontline workers, revealing the dilemma of performance faced by the AWWs.

A similar point was made by Michael Lipsky (1981), in his seminal work titled ‘Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in public service’. He asserts that the effectiveness of policies depends entirely on the frontline implementors and their day-to-day actions. Hence, he argues that discretion is key in ensuring that frontline workers are able to effectively implement policies. However, frontline workers lack discretion leading to alternate ways in which they cope. He posits two reasons for this lack of discretion. One is the need to ration resources because of the limitless demand of public goods and services and insufficient supply to match it. Second is the lack of clarity in how implementors should ration these

resources. This happens because the goals set by the bureaucracy are often ambiguous and hence, performance measures like number of cases processed, distort how workers determine priorities in their tasks. They cope with such deficits in their objectives and the ambiguity of organizational goals by restricting their conception of their jobs. He gives the example of a teacher who may abandon the ideal of helping all the children in their class to concentrate on a few. Lipsky determines the ultimate effect of such systems to be inefficient public delivery systems.

“Agencies perform inadequately because street-level bureaucrats abandon abstract goals to mitigate the immediate and persistent pressures of their working environment.” (Lipsky, 1981).

Yamini Aiyar lends an empathetic ear to the voices of the frontline by understanding how state-capacity is defined by the experiences of these very frontline workers. She focuses her attention on the teachers and education functionaries in the public school systems of Delhi. She attempts to recast the narrative around state capacity by getting a nuanced perspective on the belief that frontline implementors are apathetic, negligent and the implementors of an inefficient public system. This perspective is significant because it is this very belief that leads to monitoring and evaluation systems that assume that the entities they are monitoring are incompetent and insincere.

One prominent finding from her work was the fact that the bulk of the interactions between public school teachers and the education hierarchy is the administrative work that they are given. The daily life of a government school teacher is characterized by scolding and by their superiors. 66% of the Delhi public school teachers that were interviewed complained about administrative tasks that they believed to be not part of their job as a school teacher. When asked about their motivation behind becoming a teacher, many of them talked about passions for improving the lives of the students. However, additional responsibilities like election duty and

census work becomes the focus of their interaction with their higher-ups. The more interesting finding was that the total time they spent on administrative tasks was not as high as one would expect it to be. They perceived themselves as such because they were treated as administrators by the system.

For the Delhi public school systems, as with other states, the metrics of performance were the percentage marks that their students scored in exams. The system's primary goal was to ensure that students performed well in the exams. Subsequently this became the primary goal of the teachers as well. These were the norms and standards set by the system and it influenced the way teachers set their priorities. This, in the teachers' own opinion, resulted in rote learning, where both the teachers and the students did everything they could, to ensure that the exam scores were high. Most teachers that were studied, designed teaching strategies with exam success as the primary goal. For example, she describes the '*tu padh mei padh*' method where the teacher gets the students to read from the textbook repeatedly, to memorize the content.

The study located a dissonance in the minds of the school teachers. Even though they resented the pressures of the metric-driven performance measurement system, they regarded it as important and inevitable. They did not challenge the basic premise of this system. They accepted it and adhered to it. This led to a conflict between their perception of their job as a teacher and their approach to performing their role in ensuring that their students score the expected marks in exams.

This demands an evaluation of exam marks as a measure of the success of the students and, by transitivity, their teachers. It raises the question that if the norms of the system stress the importance of marks, so much so that the activity that is supposed to be measured by the marks is geared towards acquiring them, are they a reliable reflection of the phenomenon they are trying

to measure? Moreover, if marks serve as performance measurement systems for the teachers, how does that influence the way they perceive and perform their jobs? (Aiyar, 2024).

Watson (2006) discusses the link between professional identity and performance. He discusses, through the case of a school teacher, how professional identity is a performance that is drawn from different sources. More importantly, he describes how the process of creating this identity is influenced by the institution in which he is situated. This is significant because the dissonance discussed by the Delhi school study causes a distorted construction of identity that may affect performance (Watson, 2006).

The primary criticism against NPM corresponds with the second dimension of resource allocation to welfare programs like ICDS- political performance. A 2019 study found that everyday M&E practices were being used for ‘state performance’. “I find that ICDS functionaries use state practices to: (a) perform caste, exercising dominance but also contesting caste-based subordination, (b) develop and manage informal systems of financial practices, and (c) stage performance to make it appear as if targets have been met and rules followed.” (Deshpande, 2019). Due to the political realities of a country like India, M&E systems become a metric of the political incentives it can offer to stakeholders. Hence, along with managerial functions, they also function as ‘performance measurement’ systems for the program and its functionaries. As a corollary to this, I will be using M&E systems in ICDS functionally as both-efficiency tools as well as politically linked performance measurement tools.

Performance measurement is inherently political. It involves choices about what is measured and what becomes visible to political stakeholders. Such systems shape organizational goals in subtle ways. Peter Woelert, in his analysis of performance measurement in the public sector concludes that a strong reliance on quantified measures of performance leads to outcomes

that are more technical, costly and politically controlled. “Performance measurement works through social and political rather than mechanical channels and hence has winners and losers and is extremely consequential.” (Lewis, 2015).

However, there have been no Indian studies about how M&E systems affect public sector workers. There is a need to get a non-normative understanding of this effect. It is important to understand how government-designed M&E systems manifest on the ground and how they influence the behaviour of frontline implementors. This paper aims to fill this gap.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Limitations

Methodology

In this study, I will explore the effects that government-designed monitoring systems have on frontline workers. I will attempt to refrain from giving value judgments on the findings and will adhere to an analytical approach to understand what goes on in the lives of Anganwadi workers and how they think about, practice and respond to the monitoring and evaluation systems used by the government. My approach to studying this phenomenon will be empathetic, and grounded in social science research principles.

Following are the research questions addressed in this study:

- How do government-designed Monitoring and Evaluation systems shape the delivery of Early Childhood Care and Education services under ICDS?
- How do Monitoring and Evaluation requirements influence the priorities, time allocation, and work practices of Anganwadi Workers and Supervisors?

To understand this phenomenon, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Anganwadi Workers and supervisors in Maharashtra. The participants were selected with purposive sampling. Any AWW or supervisor who was willing to offer information and insights into the subject was interviewed. 7 AWWs and 4 supervisors were interviewed. Interviews were conducted across four districts- Pune, Satara, Buldhana and Latur. Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached. Table. 1 gives the district-wise number of respondents. 5 of the AWWs interviewed were from Pune, 1 from Buldhana and 1 from Latur. Of the 4 supervisors interviewed, 1 was from Satara, 2 were from Buldhana and 1 was from Aurangabad.

Table 1*Data Log Table*

Role	District	Pseudonym
AWW	Pune	Shruti Tai
AWW	Pune	Siddhi Tai
AWW	Pune	Kalyani Tai
AWW	Pune	Sejal Tai
AWW	Pune	Esha Tai
Supervisor	Satara	Shailaja Madam
AWW	Buldhana	Meena Tai
Supervisor	Buldhana	Lata Madam
Supervisor	Aurangabad	Renuka Madam
Supervisor	Buldhana	Fathima Madam
AWW	Latur	Jayashri Tai

Consent, either written or verbal, was taken from each participant and the interviews were recorded. All the interviews were conducted in Marathi and then transcribed to English. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to anonymize their identity. A semi-structured interview guide was used to guide the discussion. However, it was used only as a guide and the discussions covered topics beyond the interview guide as well.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary mode of data collection based on multiple M&E effectiveness studies that employ the same methodology. Moreover, this paper aims to analyse the human component of government-designed implementation systems. To understand the phenomenon as objectively as possible, and to have an open-minded approach, this tool was selected.

ICDS was selected because it is one of the oldest and most comprehensive policies on ECCE in India. It is the primary policy implemented by AWWs through AWCs. AWWs were selected as participants because they are the primary point of contact between ICDS and the beneficiaries. On the other hand, supervisors have an upward perspective in the hierarchical chain of ICDS functionaries. This will give us a wider perspective of the M&E systems and their effects. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling, based on their direct involvement with M&E processes, reporting requirements, and performance reviews under ICDS.

Maharashtra was selected as the primary location because of my previous exposure to the ECCE landscape in the state. Familiarity with ICDS implementation in the state as well as feasible access to ICDS functionaries in the state were the primary reasons for selection of this location. Moreover, proficiency in local languages was helpful in conducting deeper and more nuanced interviews with the participants.

Maharashtra Context and Experiences from the Field

ECCE policies, along with other policies, are governed by the Department of Women and Child Development of Maharashtra. Under the department, 1,10,630 AWCs run 1,08,776 AWWs are currently functioning (Ministry of Women and Child Development, n.d.). Dharavi was part of the ICDS pilot project before it was launched in the country. Monitoring, like other states, happens primarily through Poshan Tracker, an app based monitoring system that governs most routine functions of Anganwadi centres. Some other schemes of the WCD that are implemented by AWWs are *ladki bahin*, *ladki lek*, Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, Ayushman Bharat, etc. Most of these are Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), or Public Health schemes.

Anganwadi workers in Maharashtra have been protesting against the government since 2023. Their demands include raising food cost for malnourished children and increasing the rent allowance for Anganwadi Centers. They have also demanded more efficient mobile phones and an increase in pay as well as pension like other government employees. More recently, Anganwadi workers have complained about increased online clerical work. On December 9, 2025, they challenged the government's Facial Recognition System (FRS) and One Time Password (OTP) verification for the Take Home Ration (THR) scheme, in Bombay High Court. They filed a petition stating that the new systems were causing hardships to the AWWs. ““The faulty FRS and OTP verification system, coupled with the issue plagued by the Poshan Tracker app, have caused great hardship to Anganwadi Workers who are unable to discharge their duties efficiently,” the petition said. It added that delays force workers to “work overtime to finish their work, which can be finished in a timely manner if the systems work correctly” (Sah, 2025). In addition to this, recent reports have found that uptake for THR in Maharashtra is very low. The

quality of the food packets is reported to be very low and some have reported dead insects inside the packet.

Another issue has been the honorarium for filling DBT scheme-related forms. For three months after the scheme was launched, AWWs in Maharashtra engaged most of their time in filling online forms for the scheme. They did this amidst reported challenges of non-functional applications, slow internet, power cuts and overtime work. It was reported that during these months, filling forms was the sole focus of their work, with children's education being sidelined. They were promised Rs.50 for each form they filled. However, a lot of the AWWs have not received the promised compensation.

The AWW protest was attended and supported by Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray and party MP Sanjay Raut. They condemned the incumbent government for being insensitive to the AWWs' problems. Later on, Chief Minister Eknath Shinde met with the protesting workers to understand their demands. However, most of their demands were turned down by him and a few were to be reviewed later (Sah, 2025).

It was amidst this political environment, that I interviewed AWWs in Maharashtra. The complexities associated with the topic influenced the data collection process significantly and created some limitations. The first challenge this created was in building trust with the AWWs that I was interviewing. Regardless of disclosing my identity, role and purpose of interviewing them, they thought I was sent by the management. Most of them were guarded and hesitant to speak with me. Some of them confirmed that I don't know their supervisor and that I have no affiliation with the government.

Although most of them became more comfortable as the interview went on, their responses may have been coloured by the doubt that the interview would get them in trouble.

This may have created another challenge in the form of the responses not being an accurate representation of reality. Some said that there have been no problems with the THR. Some said that completing clerical work was a matter of skill and competence and the AWWs who could not do it were simply incompetent. Some said they had plenty of time to give to other tasks.

Sejal Tai was one the oldest and most competent AWWs that was interviewed. She had deep knowledge of ECCE which was apparent in her responses. However, she refused to say anything critical about the system. She said that she is close with one of the city corporators in Pune. She implicitly placed herself above the other protesting AWWs and believed herself to be part of the system that was being criticized. However, as the interview progressed and she became more comfortable, she started discussing some of the problems she faced while dealing with senior officials.

Hence, the socio-political nuances and realities of the ICDS hierarchy should be kept in mind while thinking about the interviews and the information they have revealed. Many AWWs gave contradicting responses. Some had strong criticisms against the system while some believed it had no problems. Many of them were scared of their supervisors and other senior AWWs. This fear was so strong that despite promising that I don't know their name or centre number, they were still apprehensive about being candid because of the perceived risk of getting into trouble because of something they say.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews with the AWWs and supervisors were coded and then arranged into themes for ease of analysis. Almost 200 codes emerged, of which 114 were from AWW interviews and 84 were from supervisor interviews. These codes were categorized into themes to obtain coherence, recurring themes and common narratives. Following are some prominent themes and preliminary insights that emerged from them.

In terms of services delivered, both AWWs and supervisors listed scheme functions like ensuring nutrition, reducing malnutrition, guiding adolescent girls, weighing and distributing food, helping beneficiaries with documentation, home visits, referral services, growth monitoring of children aged 0-6 years, providing meals, etc. Similar responses were obtained when asked what they think is their role as AWWs. Some AWWs responded with scheme functions like ensuring E-KYC happens, distributing food, referral services, vaccination, etc. Service delivery and role-perception have significant overlap with each other for some AWWs that were interviewed. Meena tai, an AWW from Buldhana answered the question of their role as AWW with “We do FRS for THR every month”. A purely monitoring based activity was one of the first things that came to her mind while thinking about her role as an AWW.

Some AWWs that were interviewed had a much deeper perception of their role in the community. They saw themselves as mentors for the women and parents in their community. Some saw themselves as teachers for the children that are enrolled, feeling responsible for ensuring that the children develop in a way that makes them functional and valuable members of society. They felt responsible for imbibing values in the children and in helping them distinguish right from wrong. They felt that they had an important role to play in guiding women on how to be good mothers for their children and ultimately ensuring that the children get the care and nutrition they need in their early years. Sejal Tai, who had 23 years of experience being an AWW

in the same community said, “Sometimes they listen to us more than they listen to their mother-in-law”.

Supervisors, while answering the same question, discussed their role as mentors and managers of the AWWs and AWCs. Most of them talked about guiding AWWs when they are struggling and conducting trainings for them. Another recurrent response was monitoring the implementation of the schemes. They felt responsible for ensuring that the schemes are reaching the beneficiaries and are creating some kind of impact. They also felt that in order to do this, they must push, motivate and help the AWW. One supervisor, Shaila madam, talked about diagnosing root causes of bottlenecks and personally intervening in solving them. She narrated her experience of the AWC in a small community that was experiencing high child mortality. After diagnosing language and communication barriers she personally invested time in counselling the community and getting them to send their children to AWCs for health checks and nutrition. She believed that field visits and being in touch with the realities and contexts of the areas they supervise is an essential component of her work as supervisor.

Most AWWs described a range of monitoring-related data collection they do on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. They are expected to maintain a physical register as well as input data into the Poshan Tracker app installed in the phones provided to all AWWs. They must maintain meticulous records of the heights and weights of all children aged 0-6 years in their allotted population (by the 5th of every month), as well as all beneficiaries of the various schemes that they implement. They must fill forms for Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT) schemes like *ladki bahin* and *ladki lek yojana*. They must ensure that E-KYC and other documentation of all beneficiaries is complete. They must enter the time of opening of the AWC which is tracked by geotagging their location. They must also do face verification of the beneficiaries receiving THR

packets. Aside from this, they are monitored through WhatsApp groups with the supervisors where they regularly upload pictures of the children. Most of the data requirements reported by the AWWs were corroborated by the supervisors as data that was asked from them by their superiors. Data like health data, DBT forms, scheme beneficiary records were found to be routinely demanded by higher-ups. Table 2 describes the various roles, tasks and functions of AWWs as observed from the interviews.

Table 2

List of Services and Functions

Services	Data/Information	Schemes Implemented
Nutrition	Filling Registers	ICDS
Food Distribution	Heights	Poshan Bhi Padhai Bhi
Documentation	Weights	Poshan 2.0
Home Visits	DBT Forms	Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana
Referral	PMY Forms	Kishori Shakti Yojana
Vaccination	Weighing Food	Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana
THR	Attendance	Ladki Bahin
Meals	Record of Beneficiaries	Ladki Lek
Guidance to beneficiaries	Monthly Reports	Ayushman Bharat
Guidance to adolescent girls	Poshan Tracker Data	

Guidance to Pregnant women	E-KYC	
Guidance to lactating mothers	Face Capture verification of Beneficiaries	
Provision of cooked meals	OTP Verification of Beneficiaries	
Detection of Malnutrition	Videos and Pictures on WhatsApp group	
Childcare Services	Time of opening AWC	
Pre-School education		

Shaila madam believed that the M&E systems were not a good representation of the status of the scheme on the ground. She discussed AWWs often filling inaccurate growth monitoring data to show better nutrition outcomes in their village. She also believed that there is a need for monitoring of educational learning outcomes for the children. She said it is currently not measured or tracked by the state in any way.

Within these M&E systems, AWWs face significant challenges. The most recurrent response was slow internet and bad software. Most AWWs have experienced the app getting stuck, facial recognition not recognizing faces and slow internet speed affecting how efficiently they can use the app. Many of the participants discussed an overtime increase in workload, especially after the introduction of online monitoring systems. Some discussed the challenge of finding beneficiaries for official records. Mentioning that beneficiaries don't want to give time

for record keeping activities like KYC verification, face verification, Aadhar verification, etc. Some AWWs talked about private school posing a challenge to enrolment. They believed that the people's perception of the quality of education in AWCs being worse than that of private preschools, was causing low enrolment. Many mentioned that the THR was of bad quality and there was no demand for it among beneficiaries. Both supervisors and AWWs mentioned how when the higher ups ask for some data, they must gather and submit it within 2-3 days.

A word used frequently through the interviews was "*ladlela kaam*" or 'imposed work'. Many of them felt that clerical and administrative work for Department of Women and Child Development schemes that are not ICDS, is not their job and that it was imposed on them. This was also a term frequently used by supervisors who believed that their job was to oversee ICDS implementation and work related to other MoWCD schemes should not be imposed on them. AWWs also believed that they deserved more and timely honorarium and remuneration. However, this was not mentioned by supervisors that were interviewed. Overall, most AWWs and supervisors discussed time constraints caused by the imposition of MoWCD scheme-related work that is imposed on them.

Some realities of the way the M&E systems, combined with the resource constraints, create additional pressures on the AWWs emerged through the interviews. Many AWWs talked about being reprimanded by their supervisors for not filling complete data about their region. Almost all of them reported being regularly asked about online data-filling by their supervisors. Two AWWs mentioned being threatened and scolded by their supervisors if data-filling work is not completed. Four of them mentioned feeling stressed by these patterns and feeling nervous about visits from 'big people'. Some AWWs took pride in the fact that their data was already complete and one referred to AWWs that cannot do the same as incompetent. Some discussed

such AWWs, who don't have complete data, being publicly mentioned by their supervisor in the WhatsApp group, or in review meetings. This conception was also confirmed by the supervisors, who when asked about how they define a 'good AWW' talked about the 'quick' AWWs being better than the 'slow' ones.

This influences the way AWWs and supervisors plan and manage their tasks. One supervisor mentioned how she prioritizes some tasks over others and communicates these priorities to the AWWs. When asked how she decides these priorities, she said she decided based on what her superiors are currently emphasizing in meetings. When these priorities are communicated to the AWWs, they use various strategies to collect the data. One AWW mentioned calling 'meetings' where the beneficiaries will gather in one place and she can register them. Some talked about starting the height and weight recording from around the 27th of the previous month so they get sufficient time to collect the data. Some AWWs explicitly mentioned that they use 'tricks' and 'smart ways' to complete their data filling. Some said that the AWH looks after the children when she does clerical work. However, most AWWs said that they just 'manage'. Most mentioned working after they go home so they may get Wi-Fi coverage. They talked about staying till evenings or having to physically seek out beneficiaries by visiting their house. Most participants, including supervisors, mentioned doing off time work. When asked about how much time she has to give to data filling work, Siddhi Tai, and AWW from Pune, said "Any amount of time. As soon as I finish my chores I sit down to do this. The app closes after 10 pm. So I have to do before 10pm. All *sevikas* do this. If not they use wifi and keep doing [The work]. It happens quickly over wifi".

Many AWWs as well as supervisors discussed being unable to give sufficient time to childcare and ECE. However, while describing their schedule, almost all AWWs mentioned being

able to give at least 2 hours to the AWC children. Despite this fact, most of them, including supervisors, felt that they were constrained by their clerical work while doing their actual work.

Despite these responses, many participants seemed to attach a sense of meaning and purpose with their work. Many talked affectionately about their AWC children. Many felt that their role as guides and teachers was extremely important. Some of them felt like some parents and you girls respected them and valued their guidance. Multiple participants launched into anecdotes about their work and how they helped the community. Three AWWs talked about how their past students now have children who attend the same AWC. Two of them talked about the positive impact of their mentoring on adolescent girls.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Discussion

The System

To understand how AWWs function within the system of which they are a part, it is important to understand the various characteristics of the system itself. First, the system expects them to deliver the services listed by both the AWWs and the supervisors. It covers multiple domains like health, nutrition and early childhood education. One might observe that the list of services that came through from the interviews has about 20-25 items. This list of services may include implementation of schemes other than ICDS. This may include health-related schemes, DBT schemes, etc. Since it is not feasible to give equal importance to all services, the system periodically decides and sets priorities. These state-decided priorities then influence the way ICDS functionaries plan and prioritize work.

The second characteristic is how this service delivery is monitored by the state. The system periodically demands different kinds of data to be submitted by the AWWs. It uses quantitative metrics that are entered into an online system. This online system is characterized by slow internet and software. The system causes inefficiencies that percolate into the way AWWs work. It increases the amount of time they have to allocate for data collection and monitoring. The system ‘imposes’ work on AWWs that is not perceived by them as their job. It dictates what must be given priority in the ICDS system. The way these priorities are decided is not clear to the implementors of the schemes. The goals of the system and how these goals are determined is also not clear to the AWWs. For them, this process is random. The link between the work they are doing and why they are doing is not established by the system. “The objectives (of ICDS) and this work have nothing to do with each other. The objectives get ignored and only this work remains. It is a lot of work” (Meena Tai).

The system decides the ‘worth’ of an AWW based on the amount of data-entry tasks she has completed. A ‘good’ AWW is decided by how savvy she is with the online data collection system and how quickly she is able to use it to collect and enter the data demanded by the state. On the other hand, an AWW who cannot do this is reprimanded, either privately or publicly by her superior. Moreover, it determines her work among her peers and affects her inter-personal dynamics with them. This is reflected in the way Sejal Tai refers to AWWs that could not record sufficient weights for the month- “See how ‘smart’ they must be”. Thus M&E systems, due to the priorities of the state, also function as performance measurement systems for the AWWs. Hence, conceptually, both the system and the AWWs perceive themselves as teachers and mentors for the community, the AWWs are treated as data collectors and form-fillers. Even though AWWs are told that their job is childcare and support to women, majority of their interaction with the system comprises of data collection and monitoring metrics. Good childcare work is still rewarded but it is not emphasized by the system as important.

These characteristics come about from the way the system justifies the resources that go into it. “In ICDS, the indicators that are most carefully measured and reported are those related to the supplementary nutrition program (SNP). This is because this is the only intervention that is directly linked to a financial allocation (Rs.4 per child per day) and the number of beneficiaries determines the amount of money to be allocated for the procurement of food supplements” (22). In a resource-constrained country, in order to keep receiving resources, the system must show evidence that it is working. It is of relatively less importance whether or not this evidence reflects outcomes. Moreover, the primary function of M&E systems becomes this justification of resources and not program management of efficiency. A paper discusses how M&E systems are often aligned with donor priorities, influencing what data is collected and how it is used, with

limited relevance for local decision-making. Additionally, political actors may engage in monitoring processes for visibility and legitimacy (Ochen-Ochen, 2025). This issue is somewhat clear to functionaries of the system. While expressing her frustration with the system, Meena tai said, “When it comes to money, problems are always tied with it”. Another instance of this phenomenon being well articulated by a functionary, is a supervisor that George (2025) interviewed. “Correct data is a high-risk, low reward activity” (George, 2025). This implies that the penalties associated with not submitting data are much higher than the rewards associated with submitting the correct data.

The case also demonstrates how state-designed M&E systems might not be good representations of reality. Scott (1998), discusses how the state reduces complex realities to measurable outcomes because it is more manageable for the state. He asserts that how things are measured serves primarily the state’s interest which might not be aligned with the public’s interest. He disputes the very idea that metrics can give a reliable idea of the reality. “For many purposes, an apparently vague measurement may communicate more valuable information than a statistically exact figure” (Scott, 1998). This is reflected in the way some supervisors have found AWWs entering incorrect data to project better outcomes from their AWCs. Shailaja Madam explained, “Sometimes they fill the wrong weights because they think “my village should not look like it is malnourished”. So I have to go visit the centre and explain to her that this is how you fill the data. You have to fill the correct data.” Hence, not only are the M&E systems not a good measure of the reality, they also fail to account for the context-specific complexities of the AWCs.

Another way that the state justifies resources, as observed by Sejal Tai, is through language. "Language is so important right? We work every day. But the language is different. We take them to the hospital. But it must be called referral service. We help them, we do so many

things. But when you say referral service, that's different" (Sejal Tai). The work done by AWWs needs to be standardized in a way that it can be tracked. Language plays an important role in this. For work to be counted and acknowledged, it needs to be translated into the language of the state. This also implies that work that cannot be counted or standardized in the 'state's language' is not visible in the state's eyes.

The Response

The importance of data in the state's eyes affects the way AWWs perceive themselves. Even though a significant number of AWWs had a deeper understanding of their role in the community, they still associated the idea of 'good work' with how much data they have collected. In their minds, childcare and education is an optional activity and the data collection takes priority. This is because data is tracked by the state. These priorities are set by the state and AWWs have no discretion. ECE is not prominent in the kind of goals set by the hierarchy and organization within which AWWs function. Even though they know what their job is, that is not how they associate themselves with the system. Within the organizational structure, they are positioned as data collectors and short-term scheme implementors.

This dissonance between the idea of an AWW's job and how the system treats them causes distortions in the way they view themselves and the goals they are serving. They view themselves as teachers, caretakers and mentors. However, they also associate themselves with the MoWCD vocabulary like 6 services, ladlki bahin, matruvandana, etc. Unclear goals and role perceptions create inefficiencies in the system. "Local government actors often struggle to engage in strategic goal-setting due to institutional and political pressures that push them toward reactive, short-term decision-making" (Watson, 2016). Hence, their work becomes a series of reactions to everything the system imposes on them. These reactions are brought on by the systems of accountability used by the functionaries. Some have talked about feeling stressed and

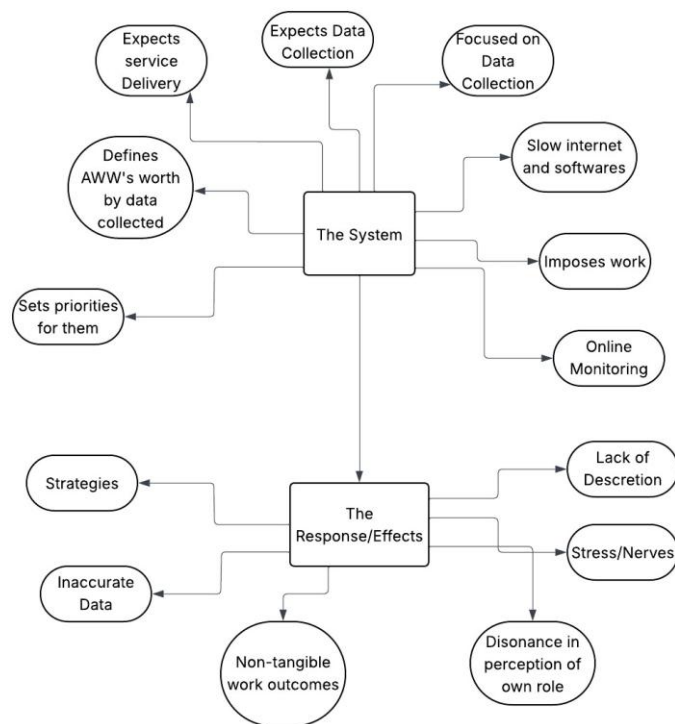
pressured. Sejal Tai discussed feeling nervous about visits. “Just when big people are visiting, something goes wrong. The new officer is very *kadak*. “Don’t you know this? Don’t you know that?”. Such systems cause them to use different kinds of coping strategies like tweaking the data, working overtime, etc.

AWWs don’t have discretion over how they plan and prioritize work. Lipsky argues that discretion is very important in role performance of frontline implementors. He gives the example of a police officer. A police officer knows the best way to handle a fight or violence in his neighbourhood. Only if the police officer is given the discretion to make his own judgements, can he work effectively. “Discretion provides opportunity to intervene on behalf of clients as well as to discriminate among them” (Lipsky, 1980). Frontline implementors are the interface between the policy and the different contexts in which the policy unfolds. Discretion for the AWWs is the only way to ensure that the policy adapts to these contexts. Some AWWs and Shailaja madam, implied that they would like more discretion over their data and also their work. Esha tai said, “If register is there, there is a record and I also understand things because of that.”

The outcomes of the work they do are not tangible for the AWWs. Many of them discussed anecdotes of how they have helped children and other people from the community. They seemed proud of the fact that their students have gone on to do well in life. In such cases, the link between the work they do and the outcome, which is the children doing well, is clear to the AWWs. Many of them talked about how this motivates them. However, the outcomes of the clerical work are not clear to the AWWs. They don’t have a clear understating of how the M&E systems are positioned. They may be used as performance measurement or for operational purposes. For them, the link between the work that they do and its outcomes is weak.

Spekle and Verbeeten (2009) discusses contractibility which improves performance. He argues that incentives or punishments, which in this case come in the form of scolding or asking for accountability, only works if contractibility is high. Contractibility has three components- clear goal setting, measurable outputs and knowledge of cause and effect. Of these, two components have already been discussed as being compromised. There is a lack of goal clarity. Moreover, the link between their work and outcomes is also unclear to them. Hence, with contractibility being low, the management tactics of ICDS functionaries ultimately prove to be ineffective.

Figure 2 explains and connects these characteristics of the organizational systems within which AWWs are situated, to the effects the system has on the lives and the jobs of the AWWs. The cumulative effect of the system leads to the AWWs just accepting the fact that they have to collect the data and changing their professional goals, strategies and planning techniques to cater to the new goals. These goals may or may not align with their perception of their role, causing a cognitive dissonance in their minds.

Figure 2:*Characteristics of the System and their Influence*

The interviews also revealed that the AWWs get sufficient time for childcare and ECE activities. However, literature as well as field observations can confirm that the quality of ECE during this time is not optimal. This is because ECE is cognitively heavy work. Teachers have to plan and structure their work which requires not just time, but also mental effort and intrinsic motivation. However, in a system where their worth is determined by data collected and clerical work, their minds are occupied by the worries and pressures of ensuring that the work is completed. This leads to ECE that does not achieve the educational outcomes it should.

M&E systems are most effective when the information obtained from them is used to strengthen the service delivery process. For this, discretion is very important. It is only if M&E systems are designed and positioned in a way that program managers and implementors of ECCE services can use the information obtained for them to understand the gaps in implementation and

inefficiencies, can they contribute towards improvement in performance. However, the complexities and politics associated with governments and public delivery systems change the function of M&E systems from program management practices to state performance practices that ultimately fail to serve their purpose as efficiency tools.

Another reason discretion is important is because the state cannot, in a feasible way, measure the outcomes that are important. As James Scott (1998) points out, the question of measurement for society is impossible to solve. Outcomes such as whether or not the child was school ready, if they were able to become functioning members of society or if they were leading fulfilling lives, are impossible for any system to measure. When outcomes are unmeasurable, they must be achieved through capacity building of the AWWs and organizational norm-setting. Building a frontline of intrinsically motivated AWWs will ensure that the state achieves its goal of human capital development and protecting the educational and nutritional rights of the children.

Conclusion

AWWs form the frontline of crucial ECCE services in India. They are responsible for all government action to ensure the healthy development of children. However, ECCE delivery in India, specifically in terms of these frontline implementors, largely comprises of clerical and administrative work related to data collection and monitoring. This affects the quality of program delivery. This is because policies are made in places that are distant from the realities in which they are expected to unfold. Frontline workers like AWWs are the key determinants of how these policies translate into these realities.

In this study, I interviewed AWWs and Supervisors in Maharashtra to understand how M&E systems designed by the government to deliver ECCE services affect AWWs and

subsequently the service delivery process. These interviews occurred amidst ongoing protests by the AWWs challenging systemic problems like lack of honorarium, not being treated as government employees, increased workload, dysfunctional phones and mandatory Face Recognition verification for Take Home Ration beneficiaries.

Findings revealed characteristics of the system in which these AWWs function. The system imposes scheme related work, has non-functional phones with slow internet, sets ambiguous goals, demands data and other clerical information, scolds and reprimands the AWWs either publicly or privately, sets priorities for the AWWs and determines their worth based on the efficiency with which, they collect and submit data related to monitoring of scheme implementation.

In these contexts, M&E systems serve as performance measurement for the workers. This kind of ambiguous goal setting by the system distorts their perception of their own role and causes dissonance between what they perceive as their job and what they accept as their day-to-day work, which is a set of reactions to their work environment in a data and metric-focused system. Another issue that influences goal-setting for them is that effects or purposes of the work they do, which is primarily data collection, are not tangible to them. They develop coping strategies like overtime work, manipulating data and tricks to complete the data collection.

M&E systems must be grounded in discretion to be effective for program implementation. ECCE in India is not governed by M&E systems that can be used by the program implementors to improve outcomes. Instead, they are positioned as resource justification for the state. This leads to inefficiencies in the M&E system. AWWs must be capacitated to carry out their functions as teachers and mentors for the community and must be given discretion to serve the context-specific needs of their surroundings.

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