



A long road for migrant workers

The Supreme Court in June pronounced its judgment in the migrant labourer's case. The case was initiated last year after the national lockdown was announced. Thousands of landless labourers had started walking towards their home States due to the loss of employment and income. The Supreme Court took cognisance of the matter that year and acknowledged the plight of the workers in light of the strict lockdown.

Guidelines:

1. The court has laid down numerous guidelines to provide relief to workers and efficiently tackle the problem till the threat of COVID-19 subsides. Two of the most important components to protect the migrants during this time were the food and travel arrangements insisted on by the court.
2. It laid down that dry ration be provided to migrants who want to return to their homes. Further, the court said that identity proof should not be insisted upon by the governments since the labourers might not be able to furnish it.
3. Secondly, the court called upon the State governments to arrange transportation for workers who need to return to their homes. These guidelines by the court are crucial to ensure the safety of workers.
4. The Supreme Court fixed July 31 as the deadline for the States to implement the 'One nation One Ration Card' scheme. Under this scheme, the States are to complete the registration of migrant workers in order to provide dry ration to them.
5. Apart from the dry ration, the top court also directed the State governments to run community kitchens for migrant workers.

Important directives

1. Under the National Food Security Act, migrant workers are issued ration cards and they are entitled to dry ration under various government programmes, such as the Atmanirbhar Bharat scheme, during the pandemic.
2. In the order passed in June, the court affirmed the Right to Food under Article 21 of the Constitution. In furtherance of this, the court asked the States to formulate their own schemes and issue food grains to migrants.
3. This is an indispensable step to keep more than a fourth of the population of the country safe and healthy during the pandemic.



Challenges:

1. However, there arise administrative problems in implementing these measures. First, migrant workers keep moving in search of employment and it is difficult to cover them all under the scheme.
2. Second, many States do not have the necessary infrastructure to run and maintain community kitchens on such a large scale.
3. However, there are no normative data that would allow the States to identify eligible migrants. The court took cognisance of the issue and directed the Ministry of Labour and Employment to ensure that the National Database for Unorganised Workers is updated by July 31.
4. Finally, the top court recognised the need for direct cash benefit transfer to workers in the unorganised sector. But it did not issue any guidelines for the same as the workers need to be covered by the States themselves.

The Supreme Court has given a purposive declaration in the case but the bulk of the judgment seems declaratory rather than mandatory. In order to efficaciously implement the orders of the court, the State governments need to work with the Centre closely. With the third wave of COVID-19 infections looming, it is imperative to ensure that government machinery works to its full potential and robust systems are developed to withstand the challenges.

Challenging negative social norms

Turning the focus on women and improving access to information and services leads to better health outcomes.

Highlights:

1. India has entered a demographic sweet spot that will continue for another two to three decades. Half of India's population is under 29 years of age, which means that in this period, a greater proportion of young people will drive India's economic growth and social progress.
2. So, they must not only be healthy, knowledgeable and skilled but must also be provided with the rights and choices to develop to their fullest potential, including, and especially, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).



Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)

The SRHR includes issues such as violence, stigma and respect for bodily autonomy, which greatly impact the psychological, emotional and social well-being of individuals.

Developmental goals

1. India's population growth is now stabilising. The decline in overall fertility notwithstanding, the population will continue to grow because of the effect of 'population momentum'.
2. The Total Fertility Rate (TFR), presently at 2.2 children, will soon reach replacement level (2.1). However, the TFR remains higher than the national average of 2.2 children among women who live in rural areas, have little formal education and are in the lowest income quintile — a majority of them live in the poorer States.
3. Changing social norms is one of the biggest challenges for India to address the needs of the next generation.
4. For example, India's population stabilisation strategy must be adjusted keeping in mind the rights of women and girls. Women must have a greater say in choosing their family size.
5. Prescriptive or coercive methods, such as one- or two-child norms, have rarely worked well anywhere for long.
6. It goes without saying that for women and girls, the empowerment to make choices leads to better health outcomes, such as knowing how to prevent unintended pregnancy or giving birth with the help of a skilled birth attendant.

Challenges to SRHR

1. Even before the pandemic, pervasive negative social norms, health system barriers and gender inequality hindered universal access to SRHR as envisioned under the Programme of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD).
2. In the last two decades, India has made substantial gains with SRH indicators. Progressive policies for maternal health have resulted in improved rates of institutional delivery and a decline in maternal mortality ratio (MMR) from 327 in 1999-2001 to 113 per 100,000 live births in 2016-18, as per Sample Registration System (SRS) data.



3. There have also been significant shifts in family planning in the past decade, and data from the National Health Family Survey 5 for the year 2019-20 (NFHS-5) show how contraceptive prevalence has improved in most States. We ought to celebrate India's success, as it significantly contributes to global progress.
4. The current government, with programmes such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP), has made some efforts to challenge existing social norms and has underlined that investments in social causes must go alongside economic progress.
5. All sections of society must embrace this call for positive change, each doing their part, from the individual to the institution level. The UNFPA is keen to take India's success models and strengthen the South-South Collaboration further.

Poor indicators

1. But success is hard-earned and never assured. There are many challenges on the path to 2030, the goalpost for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
2. Two million adolescent girls (15-19 years) each year had a pregnancy, and of these, nearly 63% were unwanted or unintended.
3. This points to inadequate information and access to SRH services for this age group. In girls aged 15-19 years, 22.2% had an unmet need for contraception, according to NFHS-4.
4. Girls are still marrying too young — 26.8% of women aged 20-24 years are married before they turn 18, often having their first child within the first year of marriage.
5. Far too many girls and women face gender-based violence and harmful practices that are socially sanctioned. All of these practices are rooted in social norms, beliefs and practices that deny women their bodily autonomy.
6. India has slipped 28 places to rank 140th among 156 countries, becoming the third-worst performer in South Asia in The World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report (2021).



Way Forward:

1. Time to achieve the ambitious targets of the SDGs is running out. India must hence choose its priorities carefully. The analysis seems to suggest that placing youth, women and girls at the centre of policymaking and services could trigger a positive ripple effect.
2. If young people, and adolescent girls, in particular, have access to education, relevant skills, information and services to make healthy choices, including related to SRH, are empowered to exercise their rights, and have access to opportunities for employment, then India will be on a clear path to achieve its goals.
3. What research and practical experience show is that when women can make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health, and when they have access to services to support their choices, societies are healthier and more productive.
4. A woman who has control over her body gains not only in terms of autonomy but also through advances in health, education, income and safety. She is more likely to thrive, and so is her family.
5. The UNFPA calls upon stakeholders to help build a new set of social norms to drive this mission.