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Investing in mothers is investing in India's future

To truly unlock India's productivity and economic potential, we must address challenges around maternal nutrition

Micronutrient deficiencies during pregnancy continue to be a problem in India and the consequences of this could be generational.

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India, today, stands at a defining moment in its journey towards becoming a global economic powerhouse. With a young, dynamic workforce and expanding opportunities across sectors, the foundations for growth are strong. Yet, an often-overlooked factor threatens this potential – maternal nutrition.

The first 1,000 days of life, from conception to a child's second birthday, represent a critical window of opportunity. It's when the brain develops fastest, the immune system is built, and future physical and cognitive health is shaped. For India, maternal nutrition can no longer be a health agenda alone; it is an important lever for growth.

A nutrient gap we can no longer ignore

According to a recent survey, 90 per cent of doctors and nutritionists believe that the average Indian diet today meets only 70 per cent or less of daily nutritional requirements, leaving a 30 per cent gap in nutrients. The National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau also states that the daily intake of essential nutrients such as iron, vitamin B12, calcium, and vitamins C and D consistently falls short of recommended dietary allowances (RDAs) for most people in India.

In pregnant women, this nutrient gap is even more concerning. Evidence shows that dietary diversity alone is not meeting the nutritional needs of pregnant women. According to one study, 61 per cent of pregnant women had iron deficiency.

Micronutrient deficiencies during pregnancy continue to be a problem in India and the consequences of this could be generational. Undernourished mothers are more likely to give birth to undernourished babies, perpetuating a cycle of malnutrition, which could hinder public health and economic development outcomes.

As WHO reports, 300,000 women lose their lives due to pregnancy or childbirth each year, while over 2 million babies die in their first month of life and around 2 million more are stillborn. That's roughly one preventable death every seven seconds.

There is an economic cost associated as well. Globally, the cost of undernutrition leads to approximately \$3 trillion in productivity loss annually. In low-income countries, this loss can range between 3-16 per cent of GDP – which is equivalent to being in a permanent global recession.

Need for proven interventions

Multiple Micronutrient Supplements (MMS) help bridge the nutrient gap and significantly reduce pregnancy-related risks. When taken regularly with a balanced diet, they also help improve outcomes for both the mother and the baby.

In 2021, the World Health Organization added MMS, comprising 15 essential vitamins and minerals, to its List of Essential Medicines. Following this, countries like Bangladesh and Indonesia have already revised their national policies to make MMS available through public and private channels. India's own POSHAN Abhiyaan initiative has continued to encourage adoption of prenatal supplementation, but there is potential to go further. Expanding policies to transition from iron-folic acid to MMS could be transformative for maternal and neonatal outcomes.

While awareness around the importance of nutritional support during pregnancy is increasing, busy lives often make it hard for women to follow through. This is where introducing supplements that are convenient, nutritionally comprehensive, and easy to include in daily routines becomes a game-changer for expectant mothers as it improves adherence.

Strengthening systems through collaboration

To help India achieve its dream of being a \$3 trillion-dollar economy, maternal health outcomes must be taken into consideration while building broader public health strategies. Multistakeholder partnerships are key to building efficient systems which can strengthen public health infrastructure.

- * Private sectors deliver access to innovative and transformative solutions
- * Government infrastructure ensures deeper programme reach and sustainability
- * Philanthropic partners/NGOs advocate for systemic policy change

Improving maternal micronutrition also requires last-mile solutions. Mobile clinics and digital health platforms can bridge access gaps, while community and ASHA workers can ensure women receive the right education, support and solutions. Public campaigns promoting health literacy, along with the support of community health workers, will empower women to take charge of their health more effectively. Encouraging multi-stakeholder participation and multi-pronged programmes is key to fostering adoption and adherence to prenatal supplementation, ensuring the best outcomes for mothers and babies.

Supporting a healthier future starts with self-care

Every choice we make for maternal health today lays the foundation for a stronger, economically sound and healthier future. Supporting women must span beyond just prevention of complications – it must include awareness, education, access and support to ensure adherence not only during pregnancy but also the 1,000 days that follow. When babies are given the strongest start in life, it builds a more resilient nation.

As we celebrate National Nutrition Week, we need to remember that investing in mothers' health is a strategic investment in our country's future. The returns are multi-fold and generational, and the time to act is now.

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