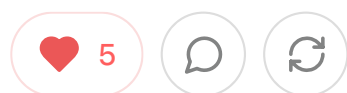


A Generation On The Brink: Nourishing India's Adolescents For A Healthier Future

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This op-ed emphasises the need for Social and Behavioural Change interventions to address adolescent malnutrition in India. By addressing the root causes of poor nutrition through interactive and culturally sensitive strategies, SBC can drive lasting behavioural changes. Read more about how ZealGrit is implementing these strategies through Project Swasth Kanya in rural Bihar. The op-ed calls for a collaborative approach to ensure sustainable progress, to empower adolescents to lead healthier lives and unlock their full potential for a stronger future workforce.

Imagine Pooja, a 15-year-old girl in rural Bihar, beginning her day at 5 AM, much like countless other girls across India. She rushes to morning tuition before heading to school, all on an empty stomach. By 3 PM, she either endures hunger or turns to highly processed snacks and sugar sweetened beverages to fill the void. What does this mean for her ability to learn and retain information and knowledge?

Adolescents-A Window Of Opportunity

India is home to one of the largest adolescent populations in the world, over 250 million strong, representing a significant demographic that will shape our nation's future. However, far too many adolescents, especially girls, suffer from various forms of malnutrition, which threatens their health, educational outcomes, and economic potential.

Adolescence is a critical period characterised by rapid physical, emotional, and cognitive development. During these formative years, the body requires an increased intake of essential nutrients such as protein, iron, calcium, and vitamins. Unfortunately, many adolescents experience a paradox of malnutrition. While undernutrition remains prevalent—leading to stunted growth and compromised immunity—urban areas are witnessing an alarming rise in obesity and related non-communicable diseases. This dual burden not only threatens the health of our youth but also perpetuates cycles of poverty and ill health.

This crisis disproportionately impacts adolescent girls, for whom adequate nutrition is crucial not just for their own health but also for ensuring healthier pregnancies and children. A well-nourished adolescent girl is more likely to have a healthy pregnancy, breaking the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition.



Source: ZealGrit Foundation

Investing In Nutrition: A Powerful Multiplier

Ensuring proper nutrition during adolescence does more than support health—it lays the foundation for a productive adulthood. Adolescents who receive balanced diets are better prepared to tackle the challenges of adulthood, reducing the risk of chronic conditions like obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Investing in adolescent nutrition is, therefore, an investment in India's future workforce. The economic

benefits of improved adolescent nutrition are compelling. According to the Global Nutrition Report 2017, investing US\$4.6 per capita annually for the SDGs in interventions to improve adolescents' physical, sexual and mental health would bring an average benefit-to-cost ratio of US\$10. This progress comes from increased productivity, reduced healthcare costs, and improved educational attainment.

Yet, data from the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21) shows that 59.1% of adolescent girls in India are anaemic. While many others suffer from deficiencies in iron, vitamin A, and iodine. These aren't just numbers—they represent real human potential lost to poor nutrition. Weak, tired bodies translate into diminished academic performance and, ultimately, fewer opportunities. When our adolescents do not receive the nutrition they need, we jeopardise not only their health but also the economic potential of our nation.



Source: UNICEF India

Addressing The Roots: Social And Behavioural Change As The Key Strategy

So, how do we improve adolescent health and nutrition outcomes in India?

The answer lies in deeply integrating Social and Behavioural Change (SBC) interventions into existing frameworks. SBC strategies target the root causes of malnutrition by addressing the social, cultural, and gender-based challenges that continue to impede progress. While India has made strides with programs like the Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram, many gaps remain due to entrenched norms and behaviours.

To bridge these gaps, SBC interventions must operate at multiple levels and involve various stakeholders—adolescents, families, schools, and the government. For example, traditional approaches to nutrition education often fail to resonate with young people because they are didactic and unengaging. Instead, interventions need to be interactive, culturally sensitive, and fun to promote real behavioural change.

At ZealGrit Foundation, we are implementing a tailored SBC adolescent health program called '**Project Swasth Kanya**'. Our approach goes beyond typical lectures to actively engage adolescents with creative, activity-based learning. For example, we use musical chairs to discuss mental well-being, the snake-and-ladder game to address urinary tract infections, quizzes to teach about balanced diets, the game Bingo to raise awareness of polycystic ovarian syndrome, and drawings to depict the learning. Additionally, we incorporate audio-visual tools like animated videos to demystify topics such as menstrual health and hygiene.



Source: ZealGrit Foundation

But changing adolescent behaviour requires more than just working with the girls. We actively involve their parents, caregivers, and teachers to ensure that the environment around these young girls is supportive. A mother, who after our home visits, stopped giving her daughter money for junk food and started packing nutritious lunch boxes. This small, seemingly simple change reflects the ripple effect of SBC—when one individual adopts healthier habits, the entire community can follow suit, creating healthier habits that can last a lifetime.

The Need For A Collaborative Approach

While we understand that these efforts are a drop in the ocean, a collaborative approach is required to make the headway swiftly. Therefore, government, private sector partnerships, and civil societies must come together to create a healthier, stronger future for India—one where every adolescent has the opportunity to reach

their full potential. Platforms like Poshan Ghar and IMPAct4Nutrition are stepping stones to facilitate these partnerships, ensuring that nutrition efforts are both impactful and sustainable.

Adolescents are the backbone of our future workforce, and without proper nutrition, their potential remains untapped. With the right investments—grounded in behaviour change and community engagement—we can ensure that this generation not only survives but thrives.

Have stories, insights, or case studies to share? We would love to hear from you! Reach out at arpita.d@zealgrit.com.

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