WHO Report on Preterm Births

Why in news?

World Health Organization (WHO) has released the "Born Too Soon: Decade of Action on Preterm Birth" report highlighting the urgent need to address the preterm births.

What is preterm birth?

- **Preterm babies** - Babies born alive *before 37 weeks of pregnancy* are completed.
- **Subcategories of preterm births**
  - Extremely preterm - less than 28 weeks
  - Very preterm - 28 to less than 32 weeks
  - Moderate to late preterm - 32 to 37 weeks
- **Reasons for preterm births**
  - Spontaneously
  - Medical reasons – Infection, chronic conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure, pregnancy complications that require early induction of labour or caesarean birth
  - Other reasons - Multiple pregnancies
  - There could also be a genetic influence

> *Preterm birth is the 4th leading cause of loss of human capital worldwide, at all ages.*

What are the key findings of the report?

- **Preterm birth** – It is the *single largest killer of children* under five years of age.
- Worldwide, 1 in 10 babies is born preterm (<37 weeks gestation).
- The global preterm birth rate was 9.9% in 2020, compared to 9.8% in 2010.
- **Neonatal disorders-** They are the leading cause of burden of disease.
- **Inequalities** - 9 in 10 extremely preterm babies survive in high-income countries but less than 1 in 10 survive in low-income countries.
- **Regional disparity** - Preterm birth rates vary between regions, the highest occurring in Southern Asia (13.2%) and sub-Saharan Africa (10.1%).
- In 2020, *Bangladesh* had the highest estimated preterm birth rate (16.2%), while *India* ranks first in terms of preterm birth numbers.
- **Threat for vulnerable women and babies -** The "4 Cs" – Conflict, Climate change, COVID-19 and the Cost-of-living crisis.
- **Covid19 pandemic** - Maternal Covid-19 infection may directly affect the foetus through pathways of viral transmission from mother to baby.

What are the impacts of the preterm births?

- **Child mortality** - It is the leading cause of child mortality worldwide, accounting for nearly 1 in 5 deaths of children under five years of age.
- **Loss of human capital** - Preterm birth is the 4th leading cause of loss of human capital worldwide, at all ages, behind ischemic heart disease, pneumonia and diarrheal disease.
- **Health concern** - Preterm birth damages respiratory and cardiac systems in long term for many survivors.
- **Neurodevelopmental problems** - Babies born between 37 and 39.9 weeks are at a slightly higher risk of adverse neurodevelopmental outcomes.
- **Learning and behavioral disorders** - Even a few weeks preterm can cause learning and behavioral disorders.
- **Adult survivors** - Adult survivors of preterm births face increased risks of chronic disorders, including psychiatric and cardiovascular disorders.

SDG Target 3.2 aims to end preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5 years of age by 2030

What is the way forward?

- The quality care of the babies should be ensured to improve child health and reduce the preterm births.
- Every women should have access to quality health care.
- WHO's antenatal care guidelines should to made aware to everyone.

References

1. The Hindu | Key Findings Of The Report
2. The Wire | Way Forward For Preterm Births
3. WHO | About Preterm Births

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