Women Malnutrition

Why in news?

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Social Attitudes Research for India (SARI) undertook a survey to measure discrimination against women.

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Why the health of a mother matters?

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- The Rapid Survey on Children (2012-13) found that about 4 in 10 children are stunted. On average, **children who are stunted do less well in school, earn less, and die sooner.**
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- There are many causes of child stunting. Addressing poverty and improving education would help, but development is not the only factor. Poor sanitation spreads diseases that sap children's energy and stunts their growth.
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- Also, the health of a child's mother matters critically for whether or not the child is stunted. The first two years of life are the most important time for a child's physical and cognitive growth.
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- During this time, she depends heavily on her mother for nutrition. As a growing foetus, she gets all her food from her mother's bloodstream, and after birth, is ideally breastfed for at least six months.
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What is the ground reality?

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- Research shows that many Indian women start pregnancy underweight and gain little weight during pregnancy. This leads to low birth weight babies and high rates of neonatal mortality.

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- Women’s undernourishment contributes substantially to India’s unacceptably high rates of child stunting.
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Why are Indian women so malnourished?

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Poverty and sanitation play a role. Also, researchers suggests that **widespread discrimination against women in their own homes** likely plays an important role.

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What does SARI survey tell us?

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- Social Attitudes Research for India (SARI) is a new phone survey. One of the things SARI measures is discrimination against women.
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- In India, girls are less likely to survive infancy than boys, and if they do, parents invest less in their education.
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- Women are far less likely to work outside the home and have their own bank accounts than men. Many report little decision-making power over their own lives.
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- One aspect of discrimination against women that matters for health is **whether women eat less or worse quality food than men**. In order to measure discrimination in women’s food intake, SARI used a question that was previously used by the India Human Development Survey (2011).
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- SARI found that “One in three adults in Delhi, and six in ten adults in U.P. said they lived in households where men eat first.” These number are higher when compared to IHDS 2011 survey.
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Why are these numbers higher than what the IHDS found in 2011?

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- Part of the reason is that SARI and the IHDS asked different people. The IHDS asked only women, while SARI asked both women and men.
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- In U.P. (but not in Delhi) men were significantly more likely to say that they eat first. We do not know why men in U.P. reported more often than women that women eat last.
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- Nor do we know for sure why even among women, the SARI figures are higher than the IHDS figures. It may have to do with how respondents react to a phone survey.
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- For a respondent in a conservative household, **it may be easier to admit discrimination to a stranger on the phone** than to a progressive woman sitting in front of her.
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What can be done about it?

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- While the government cannot force people to give women an equal share of food, it could do a lot more to **promote gender equality.**
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- It could publicise and condemn this practice. It could also more **aggressively pursue policies to address discrimination against women** in other domains.
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- Encouraging girls' education, discouraging dowry, supporting marriage choice, and encouraging female labour force participation would all give women more power to challenge this damaging practice.
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Source: The Hindu

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