

According to Jejeebhoy and Santhya, 16% of all girls aged 15-19 years have already experienced pregnancy or motherhood. Unplanned childbearing among adolescents is not uncommon - 14% of all adolescents' most recent births were unplanned in 2006, a proportion that has remained unchanged since 1993. Second, the use of sexual and reproductive health services by young people is far from universal, even among the married. Young people remain poorly informed on these issues harbouring misconceptions and/or having superficial information. An additional concern is HIV with 39% of all new infections taking place among women.

Education

Girls are denied the opportunity of going to school and enrolment of girls in schools is lower than that of boys. An astounding 34 percent of girls - one of every three girls enrolled drop out before they complete Class 5. Girls are consistently left out of education as evidenced by the continuing large literacy gap between men and women of over 20%. (Census 2001)

Disproportionate malnutrition among girls

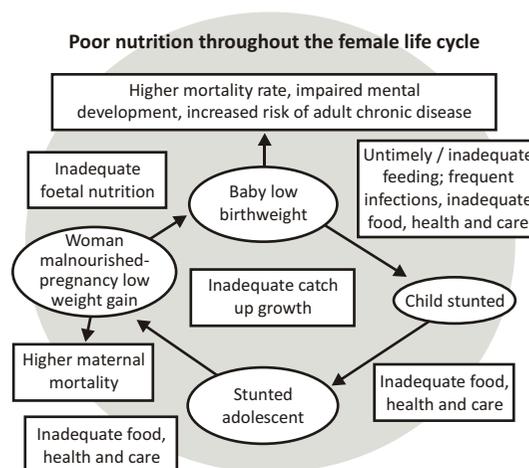
WHO has stressed that freedom from hunger and malnutrition is a basic human right and that their alleviation is a fundamental prerequisite for human and national development. The interaction of infection and malnutrition is also well documented. Better nutrition means stronger immune systems, less illness and better health. Healthy children learn better. Healthy people are stronger, are more productive and more able to create opportunities to gradually break the cycles of both poverty and hunger in a sustainable way. Thus better nutrition is a prime entry point to ending poverty and a milestone to achieving a better quality of life.

Unfortunately the root cause of malnutrition amongst girls is not just poverty and illiteracy, but also a lack of value attached to girls. (Refer figure A) A distinct preference for a male child, differential treatment of sons and daughters in terms of allocation of food, prevention and treatment of diseases and accidents have direct impact on the survival, growth and development of a girl child. Trends in India show that female mortality is higher especially during the post-neonatal and childhood stage (Report of Registrar General, 2003).

Shockingly, about 60 to 70 per cent of adolescent girls are anaemic in India. More than one-third (36 percent) of women age 15-49 years have a body mass index below 18.5 indicating chronic nutritional deficiency. Women and girls are often the last to eat as their role is to cook the

family meal and feed their husband and sons first, leading to malnutrition and anaemia.

Figure A: Poor nutrition in the female life cycle



Source: Adapted from the *State of the World's Mothers 2006*, Save the Children, US.

The consequences of inequity

Continuing social strictures on females

The socio-cultural set up prevalent in our country has immense repercussions on the present status of the girl child. The predominant patriarchal mind set, the labelling of women as the 'weaker sex', the low value assigned to women in society; all conspire to deny our girls their rightful social status. These translate into social strictures that are enforced through custom and social behaviour. For example, girls have circumscribed social mobility and play; they are expected to take on the role of caregivers at a very young age; they are forced to drop out of school for a variety of reasons including the attainment of puberty; and they are denied work and are paid less than men for the same work. Such social strictures not only deny the girl child her rightful due at every stage of her life, but also breed illiteracy, poor ability to leverage social resources and limit her capacity to voice her opinions and demands.

Inadequate protection of girls

In an effort to combat sex-selective abortions, the Government of India passed legislation in 1996 banning prenatal sex determination through ultrasound diagnosis. However, this law has done little to change the disturbing trend of missing girls.

The girl child is extremely susceptible to abuse, violence and exploitation within and outside her home. A study on Child Abuse carried out in 2007 indicates the rising tide of

violence across the country. Over 45% of girls in school report corporal punishment, and just under 50% report violence within their domestic environment. Over a third of ever-married women report spousal/domestic violence and only half of married women report participation in household decision making. Child marriages continue despite the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) with Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh having the highest incidence.

The ILO estimates that there are more girls under 16 years in domestic service than any other type of work. Adolescent girls are traded off as domestic servants, construction workers, labourers in sweat shops, on farms etc. There is also a growth in the numbers of girls being trafficked for sex work. Traffickers violate an array of human rights as victims are subjected to physical, psychological and sexual violence.

Adverse female health and nutrition indicators

In any review of health and nutritional indices, it is a matter of course that the indicators for girls and women will be poorer than those for boys and men. This is true across most geographies, communities, and social groups in India. In fact, when indicators favour women is it remarkable.

It has also been shown that poorly nourished mothers and those of young age have babies that are below the normal birth weight. The NFHS-3 showed that the percentage of low birth weight babies born to mothers below the age of 20 years was 6 percentage points higher than those older than 20 years.

Millennium Development Goals

Goal 3: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015.

Goal 5: Reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio. Achieve, by 2015, universal access to reproductive health.

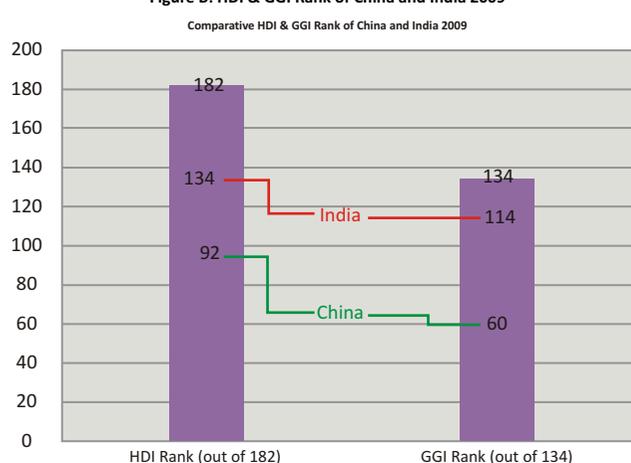
Source: UN website- <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>

Much of the redress of the health and nutritional inequities can be mediated through improved health care that is non-discriminatory. Some can be encouraged through positive action and conditional cash transfer schemes such as the Janani Suraksha Yojana. But real improvement demands a social revolution which not only provides equal opportunity but also equal outcomes.

Failure to progress adequately on Millennium Development Goals and Gender Gap Index

Nutritional status is a key Millennium Development Goal indicator of poverty and hunger. Further, Goals 3 and 5 highlight the importance of promoting gender equality to prevent malnutrition among females. These serve as an important parameters to address the gender based inequities.

Figure B: HDI & GGI Rank of China and India 2009



The Global Gender Gap Index examines the gap between men and women in four fundamental categories: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, political empowerment and health and survival. The Gender Gap Report documents India's dismal position on gender issues. Of the 134 countries surveyed in 2009, India comes in at the very low rank of 114, barely 20 ranks above the last. Furthermore, of the 182 countries surveyed for the Human Development Index, India (rank 134) trails behind China at 92 (Refer figure B).

Efforts by government to address poor nutrition

In planning for the XI Five Year Plan, the Planning Commission constituted a Working Group on 'Development of Children' with a sub-group on the 'Girl Child'. The objective during the XI Plan period is to holistically empower the girl child in all aspects so that she can become an equal partner with boys. This requires that the various constraints facing the girl child be addressed. Special importance is to be accorded to assure all girl children the right to life and liberty, to uphold their dignity and security within the family and society and ensure the utmost attention to their right to equality and social justice. The National Nutrition Policy, 1993, recognizes the stage of adolescence as a special period for a

