Poor access to abortion drugs

Context:

- Findings of the study carried out by the Foundation for Reproductive Health Services India (FRHSI) indicated a severe shortage of medical abortion (MA) drugs in five out of the six states surveyed.

Medical Abortion Drugs

- Abortion pills are different from emergency contraceptive pills.
- Abortion pills or MA drugs are abortafacients which terminate a pregnancy by expelling an embryo or foetus.
- Abortion pills are approved for use only up to nine weeks, whereas an ultrasound can detect a foetus only at around 13-14 weeks.

Study

- The study found an overwhelming shortage of abortion pills or medical abortion drugs.
- The study conducted among 1,500 chemists in six States found abysmal stocking in Madhya Pradesh (6.5%), Punjab (1%), Tamil Nadu (2%), Haryana (2%) and Delhi (34%).
- The only State that seemed to be better was Assam (69.6%).

Reasons for shortage:

- Over-regulation of drugs to curb gender-biased sex selection such as through government programmes like ‘Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao’ has hindered access to safe, legal and cost-effective abortion.
- Medical abortion drugs are over-regulated as compared to other prescription drugs.
- Regulatory hurdles are due to a misunderstanding that easy availability of medical abortion drugs will be misused for sex selection.
- State-wise regulatory and legal barriers are the key reasons why 79% of the chemists surveyed refrained from stocking these drugs.

Issues:

- The regulatory crackdown has resulted in abortion services becoming inaccessible, especially those during the second trimester.
- The shortage forces many women to seek a surgical abortion from a facility, reducing her choice.
- It will also reduce access to safe abortion and force them to seek services from unsafe providers.
- There are only 16,296 approved abortion facilities in the private sector in the
country.

- Whereas, MA drugs can be provided by an obstetrician or a gynaecologist, who are estimated to number about 60,000-70,000.
- The cost of first trimester surgical abortion is much higher than the cost of abortion pills plus the consultation fee.

**Way forward**

- Abortions are allowed under the Medical Termination Act.
- MA drugs are also cost-effective.