



Original Article

# Gender-Based Poverty in Water Availability

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## Abstract

Water has long influenced political and social structures. The global water crisis highlights its geopolitical importance, as access to clean water remains unequal, often controlled by privileged groups, deepening social disparities. According to Zenia Tata, the Executive Director of Global Development and International Expansion at, XPRIZ, “the role of water in shaping politics is not a recent development but has been present for centuries.” However, today's geopolitical scenario presents water availability as a critical issue. Water is a fundamental need for all living beings, essential for personal health and overall development, ranking highest among natural resources. It is not just a means of livelihood but also the origin of social, cultural, economic, and political life globally. Despite this, humans must make continuous efforts to secure water. Access to clean and safe water is a fundamental right for every individual, but it has become a symbol of power, conflict, and inequality. Historically, water rights have been concentrated in the hands of upper-caste men, landlords, and capitalists. In India's caste-based patriarchal society, upper-caste men have historically claimed water rights, resulting in easier access for them, even amid water scarcity exacerbated by privatization. In India, this issue is intertwined with the patriarchal, caste-based system, where upper-caste men traditionally dominate water rights, leaving marginalized groups, particularly women, vulnerable.

This research explores women's participation in water conservation and its impact on gender roles. It examines how community-driven water conservation initiatives can transform traditional gender dynamics. Using both primary and secondary sources, including stakeholder interviews, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of these interactions.

The study concludes that empowering women in water management is vital for equitable resource distribution and socio-economic development. Gender-sensitive policies can address water scarcity inclusively by prioritizing local infrastructure tailored to women's needs. Community-led initiatives play a key role in ensuring sustainable and equitable water management, bridging the gap between policy and practice. By involving women, these efforts promote a more inclusive and just approach to water governance, fostering long-term environmental and social benefits.

**Keywords:** participatory water conservation, Jalswarajya yojana, Water Management Committees.

## Introduction:

According to Zenia Tata, the Executive Director of Global Development and International Expansion at, XPRIZ, “the role of water in shaping politics is not a recent development but has been present for centuries.” However, today's geopolitical scenario presents water availability as a critical issue. Water is a fundamental need for all living beings, essential for personal health and overall development, ranking highest among natural resources. It is not just a means of livelihood but also the origin of social, cultural, economic, and political life globally. Despite this, humans must make continuous efforts to secure water. Access to clean and safe water is a fundamental right for every individual, but it has become a symbol of power, conflict, and inequality. Historically, water rights have been concentrated in the hands of upper-caste men, landlords, and capitalists. In India's caste-based patriarchal society, upper-caste men have historically claimed water rights, resulting in easier access for them, even amid water scarcity exacerbated by privatization.

In a patriarchal society like India, the responsibility of fulfilling household water needs traditionally falls on women. Despite this, women have no rights over water. They rely entirely on men not only for their personal water needs but also for the family's requirements. Women's struggle for water is not about rights but about sustaining the patriarchal social structure.

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The water issue is more severe for women from lower castes and classes, as they face greater challenges compared to upper-caste women. Women in families with private water ownership may use water but have no rights over it, while those dependent on public water sources face significant struggles. This prompted the **United Nations, in its 2010 General Assembly, to declare access to safe, clean drinking water and sanitation as a fundamental human right. In this context, ensuring water availability for all by 2030 became a key development goal, supported by the United Nations' water action framework announced in March 2023.**

However, the framework does not adequately address gender disparities in water access, necessitating effective policies to address the socio-economic and political challenges faced by women due to unequal water distribution.

**Research Objectives:**

1. To study women's participation in water conservation movements based on community involvement.
2. To examine whether water movements have contributed to any changes in gender perspectives within society.

**Hypothesis:**

Water conservation programs based on people's movements lead to changes in gender perspectives.

**Research Methodology:**

1. The research will use both primary and secondary sources, including books, articles, and newspapers.
2. Interviews will be conducted with women participants in water movements, local experts, and journalists.

**Significance of the Research:**

As a resident of a drought-prone village in Pathardi Taluka, Ahmednagar District, the researcher understands the severe impact of water scarcity on women and children, particularly concerning hygiene and health issues.

**Main Body:**

The availability of water in the world is limited and its biggest adverse impact is on women and young girls. Due to inadequate availability of water, women have to face sanitation and health problems. Women have to spend most of their time in search of water due to inadequate water. Women not only carry water but also plan its usage and storage. When women spend more time searching for clean water in their daily work, they spend less time learning in school and working productively in the economy. This has a negative impact on women's health as well their socio-economic-political status. Insufficient water availability makes women poor in terms of time and productivity. Therefore, it is the need of the hour to bring gender perspective into the mainstream through water action plans and public awareness campaigns on water conservation to highlight women's time poverty due to water scarcity.

Vandana Shiva has suggested solutions to reduce the women's water burden and reduce the intensity of water

problems such as traditional water storage methods, rainwater harvesting, changes in agricultural cropping patterns, public participation instead of private ownership of water, water awareness, effective implementation of government schemes, organized control of women over water and planning keeping in mind that women are water users.

**The 1992 World Earth Summit in Brazil also emphasized the importance of women's participation in water management, and agenda 21's Agenda 18 further emphasizes this.** Women's direct participation in water conservation initiatives through public participation is crucial because women are more connected to water. Women's involvement in water conservation programs is not just about making the program successful, but also about giving women an important place in the public sphere and development process and paying attention to their development.

Despite this, even today in light of the policy changes at the government level regarding water conservation and the changing perceptions about gender equality, the absence of women in the decision-making process for water conservation and consequently the unavailability of water is clearly felt. For example "**Jalswarajya yojana**" of the Maharashtra government, **although this scheme theoretically recognized women's participation, in reality, their involvement during the planning and implementation of the scheme was nil. This isn't solely due to traditional socio-cultural constraints on women, but also due to several other factors that need to be investigated.**

**Post-1990s in Maharashtra, new reforms in the irrigation sector have provisioned for women's reservation in Water Management Committees. However, merely bringing about policy changes isn't enough; increasing women's actual participation in water management is necessary.** This is because until dominant perceptions about water management changes, merely formulating policies at the managerial level and providing reservation won't empower women, Assessing the extent to which decentralization in water management has benefited women in terms of ownership rights over natural resources, planning, education and empowerment is crucial. It is becomes clear that achieving gender-based justice is impossible without incorporating private interpersonal relationships at the family level in water management.

In the past, wells were constructed within reservoirs for water recharge. In recent years Anna Hazare in Ralegaon Siddhi and Popatrao Pawar in Hiware Bazar have transformed their villages through participatory watershed development and rainwater harvesting programs. This has led to increased groundwater levels, surface water storage, irrigation area, agricultural production, dairy farming and employment opportunities. Women in Hiware Bazar not only contributed labor to the water conservation program but also took ownership of water supply for their own benefits. In this village, women hold 50 percent ownership right over houses and agricultural land. As a result, their economic productivity and participation in



decision-making regarding water conservation have increased. The concept of Water Cadre (Jal Mitra) through Jal Saheli (Women Water Worrier) and PANI PANCHAYAT (Water Panchayat) at was initiated by 'Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan' under the project title "Establishing Women's First Right to Water Resources" in 03 districts (Lalitpur, Hameerpur and Jalaun) of Bundelkhand region in India.

Participatory water conservation initiatives such as the Johads in Rajasthan, Hiware Bazar in Maharashtra and the Satyamev Jayate Water Cup organized by the Paani Foundation, Ek Gaav Ek Panvatha (one village, one water pond) by Baba Adhav have ensured not only equal wages and participation for women but also equal access to water resources.

Objectives of these all programs are: 1) To promote women's role in water-livelihood linkages through decentralization and community water management. 2) Ensures drinking water and food security and strengthening their socio-economic and political status. All these movements has boosted women's self-confidence and alleviated the hardship of water scarcity.

The difference in success between the people's movement and government and NGO-led watershed development programs is evident. While the latter often prioritize publicity and success the former genuinely empowers communities. This contrast highlights the potential of inclusive policies centered around gender equality to address multiple issues through improved water access. It emphasizes the importance of investing in local infrastructure that caters specifically to women's needs.

#### **Conclusion:**

Enhancing women's involvement in water management is crucial for achieving equitable resource distribution and improving their socio-economic conditions. Effective policies that consider gender perspectives can address numerous issues related to water scarcity, promoting a more inclusive approach to water management.

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#### **Conflicts of interest**

There are no conflicts of interest.

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