

THE GENDER “FLUID”: EVALUATING THE BURDEN OF INDIAN WOMEN IN URBAN WATER ACCESS

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ABSTRACT

Contamination and scarcity of water in India is an ever growing problem. Policy in the sphere of management and regulation of water fails to recognize the narratives of women, who are disproportionately burdened by the lack of access to clean water. Despite an international consensus on the importance of gender mainstreaming in water policy, there is a lack of literature or effective assimilation of the needs of women. This paper aims to highlight the invisible voices and narratives of rural women and the effects on their health and well being, and highlight the need for representation of women in this sphere by considering aspects of feminist theory. The paper finally poses basic policy recommendations to ensure that womens’ voices are heard and their knowledge is effectively used in this sphere.

Keywords: Urban Water Access, Indian Women, Gender, Community Management, Rural Women

INTRODUCTION

Water contamination remains to be a pervasive problem in India, with several individuals and organizations mounting legal battles to prevent further construction and pollution of Indian rivers. The population of the country has nearly doubled over the last 40 year period, which has only exacerbated the issue of water bodies being used for dumping industrial effluents, and sewage. Statistics provided by India’s Central Pollution Control Board state that 63 percent pf the urban sewage flowing into rivers is untreated. The Delhi-based PEACE institute charitable trust initiated a study, the result of which clearly indicated a direct link between contamination in the Yamuna river and waterborne diseases in the city (Chandrashekhar, 2018). Annually, 37.7 million Indians are affected by waterborne diseases due to contamination. People in rural areas do not have access to water within the home, and open defecation remains a common practice (Khambete, India Water Portal, 2019).

The UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights established the right to water as a human right in Articles 11 and 12. The Dublin Conference on Water and the Environment in 1999 further established international standards for water policy. The government has come up with strategies to curb the problem. The Government of India supplements the efforts of the states by providing technical and financial assistance under the centrally-sponsored National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP) for providing safe and adequate drinking water supply facilities in rural areas of the country (Dobe, 2015).

The National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) provides assistance to state and Union Territory governments to prevent and control waterborne diseases and in investigating outbreaks of such diseases under the Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme (IDSP). However, larger government initiatives such as the plan to clean the Ganga River, have failed (Chandrashekhar, 2018).

In rural areas, the brunt of collecting water falls upon the women of the household. Indian women often take up to 6 trips a day to gather water. The distances for such trips average ten miles a day, and the women often carry up to fifteen liters every trip. This burden results in young girls, often as young as 10 years old, dropping out of school in order to contribute to the process of gathering water (Barton, The Water Project). Further, women and young girls experience a great amount of mental anguish and 'sanitation insecurity' due to the lack of private spaces coupled with the taboo associated with menstruation. The sanitation needs of women are perceived as secondary to their obligations towards the household. The focus of policy on open defecation tends to ignore the menstruation needs of women which are directly and severely impacted by the requirement for them to gather clean water from long distances, and contamination of local sources of water (Caruso, et. al, 2017).

Despite the burden disproportionately affecting women, their voices and stories remain unheard in the battle for clean water in India. This paper aims to shed light on the impact for women due to the water crisis, highlight women who have worked towards the cause of clean water, and recommend policy objectives to increase the representation of women in this sphere.

BACKGROUND

Due to the burden on women in rural areas to collect water for their households, their health is adversely affected. The lack of a private toilet in several rural areas leads to several diseases, which can easily affect a girl at the time of menstruation, in turn affecting long term maternal health as well. Over and above water borne diseases, there have been several reports of women being assaulted while relieving themselves in public areas, or collecting water from remote

sources. Such women are also at a much higher risk than men of contracting diseases, due to more frequent contact with contaminated water (Barton, The Water Project).

There are several women activists working towards the cause of improving sanitation, and conserving water in India. Below are two examples of such women.

Amla Ruia is Mumbai-based social activist, who has impacted over 100 villages in Rajasthan by using traditional water harvesting techniques and building check dams. She founded Aakar Charitable Trust, with the goal of creating a sustainable and permanent solution for conserving water in drought hit regions of Rajasthan. The trust has helped in the construction of 200 check dams in 100 villages of Rajasthan, and impacted over 2 lakh people who earn a combined income of Rs. 300 crore every year. Such efforts further positively impact a vast number of women who are saved the arduous journeys to collect water for their households (Singh, 2016).

Shama Karkal leads Swasti, a public health organization that built a water filtration plant in Beechaganahalli, Karnataka, where the water had been contaminated with fluoride. The women of the village collaborated with the organization and help to run and maintain the plant, providing employment and an equal voice in a manner that adversely affects women in a disproportionate manner. The women of the village further collaborate with the organization to spread awareness on water contamination in neighbouring villages as well (Bacham, 2018).

Close to three thousand women from the Mandya district of Karnataka came together to revive lakes, ponds and irrigation tanks in 31 drought ridden villages. Their activism urged the administration in Karnataka to grant the women designated work status under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which is evidence of women-led community efforts having great impact (Bhoomi Magazine, 2018).

DISCUSSION

The aforementioned statistics and initiatives clearly demonstrate a need for there to be adequate representation of women and their voices in the literature on sanitation, and the impact on women, as well as the benefits of programs and initiatives that are most effective in lifting the burden off the women of the household who are first affected. Given the unique experience of women in this regard, the active participation of women increases understanding of community water and sanitation issues and enhances solutions to help end the global water crisis.

The third of the Dublin Principles states that ‘women play a central role in the provision, management and safeguarding of water.’ Ecofeminism is a subset of feminist theory, which actively advocates for an alternative approach to the neoliberal model of water regulation which

does not take into account the experiences of women, leading to a large silence in literature and translation into policy. Ecofeminist approaches are documented in various regions of Latin America, Africa, and Bangladesh, wherein the active involvement of women in water policy leads to more holistic results, tackling the adverse effects of environmental racism, classism, and sexism (Custers, 2012; Bennett et. al, 2008).

Representation of women in this sphere is crucial to move away from homogenous narratives, and instead create an intersectional analysis for effective policy. There has been a significant shift in feminist theoretical perspectives, in the issue of water inequality. Research by scholars have highlighted how members within a socio-economic group can have differentiated water access (Hoffman, 2017; Sulley, 2018; Bennett, et.al, 2008). Adopting an intersectional approach highlights how water inequality and poverty changes with time, is multi layered, and influenced by multiple social relations and power dynamics. Without a focus on these power dynamics, policy cannot possibly be effective and will only at all tackle the issue on a surface level (Sultana, F. 2009b, 2011b; Sulley, 2018).

The Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) framework sits in between positivist and critical paradigms, and sees gender as a critical variable in issues of access to resources. FPE focuses on grassroots activism in re-defining identity, gender and the nature of environmental problems. An intersectional approach along with FPE also accounts for differentiated effects within women themselves, as women are also not a homogenous category (Sulley, 2018).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

There is international recognition, through several UN Resolutions, about the importance of involving women and gender equality in the management of water and sanitation. The 1992 Conference on Water and the Environment in Dublin recognized gender mainstreaming as a prerequisite for sustainable water management. Agenda 21 of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation calls for women's participation and involvement in water related development efforts. The 2012 Rio Declaration also highlights the importance of empowering rural women as critical agents. In the definition of the Water for Life Decade, the United Nations recognized the significance of gender inequities with regard to water (Sida, 2015).

Despite this international recognition, Indian policy does not explicitly recognize the importance of gender mainstreaming in operations or policy. For example, the Draft National Water Policy, (2012) and the National Urban Sanitation Policy (2008) do not recognise the needs and difficulties of women with respect to access to water, and only set goals in a more general manner. However, as discussed above, it is crucial for there to be an explicit recognition of the

role of women due to the particular difficulties they face and the disproportionate burden that falls upon them.

Data collection, studies and promoting the allocation of gender sensitive strategies will serve for there to be an integral assimilation of womens' issues within the framework of water policy. This will also allow for effective interventions targeting women and girls to reduce their vulnerabilities, and support their education, maternal health and hygiene. Further, there must be an improvement of the indicators used to create policy, such as the time spent by women and men collecting water.

There must be also be effective policy to tackle conflict and emergency situations, in volatile areas such as the North East, and for general natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods. Gender dynamics within households must be taken into account to ensure equitable distribution of resources and relief, in order to prevent a further burden on women and the possibility of gender based violence in areas of conflict (Sida, 2015).

Approaching policy through the lens of ecofeminist, FPE and intersectional perspectives is the only method in which policy can promote a true cultural change in the long run, and not merely mandate participation of women through a law, which would only serve to encourage tokenism (Bennett, et. al, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The future of water policy cannot be gender neutral. It is necessary for policy to take power dynamics into account, as the effects of such policy benefits women most directly. Lifting women from the burden of collecting water improves their chances at education, leads to a rise in family income, and promotes good health. If women and their needs are not adequately represented, it destroys the democratic character of decision making in any society, and will only further exacerbate issues as water shortages increase in the country. The under-representation of women may also negatively affect the responsiveness of organizations to the needs of women. (Gaard, 2014).

Policy in India must take into account the differentiated effects of water contamination and scarcity on men and women, so as to prevent such gender biases in formulation and planning. It is proven and documented that benefits do not reach everyone equally. A 'one size fits all' approach is not a beneficial approach as it does not take into account changing social relations. Gender mainstreaming and the implementation of community empowerment is the way in which the future of water policy can break cultural barriers. An explicit goal of gender equality in the water sector will aid in eliminating biases in water sector planning, technology transfer,

investment, formal legal structures, and participatory programs. The cost of not doing so is far too great, in terms of women's health and their long term subjugation. Discursive, legal and organizational spaces for women will allow for the inclusion of women's knowledge and expertise in water management planning (Gaard, 2014). With the growing population of India, the rampant contamination of water, and the dangerous effects of global warming creating new zones of scarcity, this knowledge is crucial for the future.

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