

Water and Women's Right in India: An Eco-Feminist Approach

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Abstract

Water scarcity is the most widespread and serious of all the ecological disasters on the planet, and it requires immediate attention for human survival as it is affecting almost every continent causing growing concern around the world.

The author would emphasise the importance of women in conserving water in this paper because they are profoundly linked to nature due to their similar life-giving biological processes. Against this background, this paper will discuss the primary role of women in the restoration and protection of the environment through joint efforts and plans, particularly in the era of water scarcity, and how eco-feminism, a branch of feminist theory, can help to solve the water scarcity if they are given proper awareness and training.

Keywords: WaterScarcity, conservation, natural resources, eco-feminism

I. Introduction

In most parts of the world, the golden age of safe, inexpensive, and readily available water has passed. Water shortages are threatening people's lives all over the world,² and the situation is only getting worse. India, the land of scared rivers and of generous rainfall is no longer a stranger to this crisis. If we see the background, the name 'India' is derived from the word 'Indus,' which refers to a large river, and India was once known as the land beyond the Indus.³ Unfortunately, it is currently experiencing a severe water shortage, with an estimated 2 lakh Indians dying each year due to lack of safe drinking water.⁴

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² VANADANA SHIVA, WATER WARS: PRIVATIZATION, POLLUTION AND PROFIT, 366(North Atlantic Books , 2016).

³*Id.*

⁴ Edith Brown Weiss, *the Coming Water Crisis: A Common Concern of Humankind*, 118.

There is explosion of population in the last century, overexploitation of water resources, industrial pollution and many more which makes the water crisis the most serious problem of this century. Ironically, two-thirds of the world's population is expected to face water scarcity by 2025, and ecosystems around the world will suffer even more.⁵ We are all aware of the disastrous consequences of it, and they affect different groups in different ways, with the most vulnerable groups like women and children bearing the brunt of it. Women face more challenges than men in all of these groups, especially those from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds.⁶ According to the research, climate change affects women more than men,⁷ in the third world countries, women are responsible for finding a resource for their families. In their struggle to get water for their families, they encounter dozens of new unwelcome health problems,⁸ particularly for pregnant women, who may consume fewer nutrients than the energy they exert by walking miles to carry water, putting both mother and child at risk. Their health is also impeded by the lack of water, as it impairs their ability to sustain a regular menstrual cycle. Girl children because of the gender norms formulated by the society often miss schools as they have to carry the burden of water,⁹ bear the brunt of water shortages child marriages are common. Women and children also suffer problems, whether it's class predation, environmental poisoning, or health risks. As a result, the water crisis has become a deeply personal matter for women.¹⁰ In our nation, women produce

<http://www.unep.org/geo/GEO4/report/GEO-ReportFullen.pdf>.

⁵ WWF, <https://www.worldwildlife.org/threats/water-scarcity>

⁶Prabhash K Dutta, *Why India does not have enough water to drink*, INDIA TODAY, June 28, 2019 at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/why-india-does-not-have-enough-water-to-drink-1557669-2019-06-28>

⁷ Mary Halton, *Climate change 'impacts women more than men*, BBC NEWS, March 8, 2018 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-43294221>.

⁸ Emily Archer, *the wells are drying up: Water & Women in Ghana*, Vol. 35, No. 3/4 (March-April 2005), 23-2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20838316>.

⁹ Annie Banerji, *Water women' quench thirst of central India's parched villages*, REUTERS, August 27, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-environment-water-idUSKCN1VH0ZQ>

¹⁰ Alexandra Barton, *Water in Crisis - Women In India*, The Water Project, <https://thewaterproject.org/water-crisis/water-in-crisis-india-women>

60-80 percent of the food and 90 percent of the dairy products. They have a big influence on finding a solution to the water crisis, and they've proven to be strong advocates for their families and communities. According to evidence from India, women are not only important in the fight against water scarcity, but they are also likely the only ones capable of doing so on a large scale.¹¹

II. Water Crisis is a Women's Issue

In a developing country, gender norms dictate that women and girls are the primary water carriers and getting a bucket of drinking water is a daily struggle for women due to depleted water resources¹² they walk long distances in rural areas and wait long hours in towns to collect water for drinking and cleaning needs for their families¹³ and are the primary victims of environmental degradation. As a result of the water crisis, women's roles as water suppliers are becoming increasingly burdensome¹⁴ and has a variety of direct effects on women and children, making water a feminist problem.¹⁵

Women are the ones who awaken society and defend the planet whenever there is a threat to life and survival. They have played a pivotal role in managing natural resources for a family and at a community level.¹⁶ As a result of women's involvement, there has been a paradigm shift from economics to ecology, as women are not only experts in the life-giving economy, but also experts in ecological science through their daily participation and management

¹¹ Arpit Jain & Reshma Anand, Why Do Women End Up Bearing The Burden Of India's Water Crisis? <https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2020/02/women-bear-the-burden-of-indias-water-crisis/> 8 feb 2020

¹² Alexandra Barton, supra note 9.

¹³ National Commission Women's Report, *women and water based on a nationwide study on the water crisis*, <https://www.indiawaterportal.org/articles/women-and-water-report-national-commission-women>.

¹⁴ Alexandra Barton, supra note 9.

¹⁵ Emily Archer, The Wells are Drying Up: Water & Women in Ghana, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20838316?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_content

¹⁶ ARIEL SALLEH, NATURE, MARX AND POST MODERN, (Zed Book London, 2017).

of these resources. For the sake of future generations, their voices must continue to be fully integrated into policy and implementation efforts at all stages.

200 million hours of women's every day are spend in collecting water worldwide¹⁷

India, a country blessed with numerous water resources, is currently running out of groundwater and surface water, water-based ecosystems are quickly depleting, rivers are drying up due to unscientific use, and water resources are being disrupted.¹⁸ Every day women and girl child walk an average of six kilometre in Asia and Africa for collecting water.¹⁹ They waste valuable time gathering water and working longer hours as part of their household responsibilities; women are unable to engage in politics or, more importantly, obtain an education; without education, gender equality can never be achieved. Women, who must walk miles to bring water as a result of environmental degradation, are the primary victims of environmental degradation.²⁰ The consequences hasn't stopped, women have been sexually assaulted while relieving themselves in public areas due to cultural norms that make it unacceptable for women to be seen defecating, causing many women to leave home before dawn or after nightfall to preserve privacy.

III. Women are Primary Sufferer of Natural Resource Depletion

These gender-specific roles have had a significant impact on women, exposing them to greater risks in the absence of safe and sanitary facilities for millions of women across the world. Let's see how water is a women issue:

A. Risk to Health

¹⁷ Jennifer Schorsch, *Small Loans for Safe Water: Unleashing Women's Power*, IMPAKTER, March 19, 2019, <https://impakter.com/small-loans-for-safe-water-unleashing-womens-power/>

¹⁸ Samar Lahiry, *Why India needs to change the way it manages water resources*, DOWN TO EARTH, July 13, 2017, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/water/challenges-in-the-management-of-water-in-india-58275>, Down to earth, 13 July 2017

¹⁹ Jennifer Schorsch, *supra* note 16.

²⁰ *Id.*

Millions of people, mostly women, are affected by major illnesses each year as a result of a lack of water, which often puts their health at risk by reducing their ability to maintain their menstrual cycle.²¹ Due to polluted water, in 2018, 36000 people were diagnosed with water-borne disease every day²² and the biggest killer of children who are below five years.²³

B. Access to Public Sphere

Women's ability to engage in life outside of the home is hampered by the lack of clean water. Because providing water is a girl's job, girls aged 6 to 14 spend an average of **one hour** per day gathering water.²⁴ Because this is a women's and girls' task, many girls are forced to drop out of school to assist their mothers in collecting water and performing other tasks. It is a great loss of women in spending their day as they regularly repeat the same journey around three times a day for water than in the forests for firewood so her day, in a nutshell, revolves around fetching water and fetching firewood and in such circumstances not able to get a proper education.

Clean water is the fundamental right given to the citizen of India²⁵ but it seems government has turned a blind eye to the growing problems associated with it. According to 2019 survey,²⁶ 40% of girls aged (15-18 years) dropped out of school due to lack of sanitation facilities or assisting in the household work. '**Beti Bachao Beti Padhao**'²⁷ cannot be achieved without access to water. Such dropouts result in an increase in unpaid child care workers, child marriages, and a perpetuation of their financial reliance on men, as well as increased exposure

²¹ *Id.*

²² Chethan Kumar, *Polluted water killed 7 every day in 2018*, THE TIMES OF INDIA, June 29, 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/polluted-water-killed-7-every-day-in-2018/articleshow/69996658.cms>

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ National Commission Women's Report, *Supra* note 12.

²⁵ INDIA CONST, art 21.

²⁶ ManashPratimGohain, *40% of girls aged 15-18 not attending school: Report*, THE TIMES OF INDIA, January 25, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/40-of-girls-aged-15-18-not-attending-school-report/articleshow/73598999.cms>.

²⁷ It is a government of India campaign aimed at raising awareness and improving the effectiveness of welfare services for girls in India.

to domestic violence. As a result, they are denied the right to education, which is now a basic right under Indian Constitution Article 21A and Right to Education Act, 2019.²⁸

C. Women and caste based discrimination

The archaic practice of only allowing upper-castes access to wells is still practised in many parts of India. Women from marginalised castes are not only mocked, harassed, and denied access to water, but there have been reports of how Dalit women being beaten up by upper-caste members for drawing water from a well. There are numerous cases of dalits being victimised.²⁹ There are many instances where dalits are victimised and harassed on account of that they suffer from physical as well as mental anguish.

D. Sanitation Facilities and Toilets

Another reason why water is associated with women is because of the lack of sanitation facilities. Most schools lack sanitary blocks with running water, making it difficult for girls reaching puberty to continue their education because there is no place to change their sanitary pads, forcing them to drop out. The two sides of the same coin are water and toilets. According to a CAG survey, 72 percent of toilets do not have running water, despite the government's construction of three crore toilets under the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan programme*. From this, it is clear that the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan programme to be successful in India it would require a separate water policy.³⁰

²⁸India: why collecting water turns millions of women into second-class citizens, THE CONVERSATION , October 17,2018, <https://theconversation.com/india-why-collecting-water-turns-millions-of-women-into-second-class-citizens-104698>.

²⁹ THE INDIAN EXPRESS REPORT, *Odisha: Dalit woman thrashed for drawing water from well in upper caste area*, September 04,2013, <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/odisha-dalit-woman-thrashed-for-drawing-water-from-well-in-upper-caste-area/1164580/>

³⁰Saptarshi Dutta, *3 Crore Toilets But Not Enough Water. Why the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan Needs A Dedicated Water Policy*, NDTV NEWS, May 30, 2017 <https://swachhindia.ndtv.com/3-crore-toilets-not-enough-water-swachh-bharat-abhiyan-needs-dedicated-water-policy-6827/>

IV. Contribution of Women's Movement for Better Management of Natural Resources

This issue can be solved if we recognise women's strength in the revival, restoration, and protection of the environment, as they have done in the past to protect a depleting environment. Women have made significant contributions to the preservation and protection of the resources in their immediate environment. Women led grass-roots movements in India, such as the Chipko Movement and the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, Anti-Militarist movement in Europe and the US, a movement against dumping of hazardous wastes in the US.³¹ One of the first environmentalist movement which was inspired by women was **Chipko Movement**, where twenty-seven Reni women in northern India took effective action to stop government permission for commercial logging in the 1970s. They threatened to hug the trees to prevent their felling. The Chipko women's protest saved 12,000 square kilometres of sensitive watershed.³² They also helped to safeguard water resources from corporate water management. Similarly, **the Green Belt Movement**, a conservation and forestry movement that began in Kenya on Earth Day in 1977, was led by Nobel Prize winner, Wangari Maathai is another well-known female-led initiative. Later, in the 1980s and 1990s³³ the anti-nuclear, pro-environment movement in the West began, which collectively influenced the central philosophy of ecofeminism that women and nature are closely connected as they have a compassionate and reciprocating relationship with the environment.³⁴

Women movement has highlighted the adverse effect of modernisation and industrialisation because they were both victims of environmental degradation and an active agents in the regeneration and protection of the environment. Women formed nonviolent action movements to protect their environment, their livelihood, and their ways of life have emerged from the Himalayan regions of Uttar Pradesh to the tropical forests of Kerala and from Gujarat

³¹DR. JANNI ARAGON AND DR. MARIEL MILLER, GLOBAL WOMEN'S ISSUES: WOMEN IN THE WORLD TODAY,(BCcampus,2012).

³²*Id.*

³³ Purnima Singh, *is ecofeminism relevant today*, October 29, 2019, <https://feminismindia.com/2019/10/29/is-ecofeminism-relevant-today/>

³⁴*Id.*

to Tripura in response to projects that threaten to dislocate people and to affect their basic human rights to land, water, and ecological stability of life-support systems.

V. Women Became Water Warriors in India

Women have raised their voices against environmental degradation at critical times and have played an important role in reviving and restoring water resources in India as evidenced by numerous examples. In order to protect environment, first environmental movement started in India was led by Amrita Devi in Bisnoi movement³⁵ along with other Bishnois struggled and sacrificed their lives to protect forest..

Another great example, where 20,000 of women came together and rejuvenated the **Nagandhi River** which is situated in the Vellore district of Tamil Nadu. The Naganadhi river was the primary source of freshwater had dried up decades ago. The place was drought prone area; the lands and wells were getting drier, so were their hopes and dreams. Women were in despair in seeing river dead river now and they build 3,500 recharge wells and several boulder checks and with the help of recharge well, rainwater was routed to the aquifers which helped in enhancing groundwater. Today, they have adequate water to drink and irrigate paddy fields.³⁶ In Bandha district of Bundelkhand, women have played an active role in bringing the life of many rivers, Bandha district is a parched region of 20 million people population with consecutive draught has taken away many water resources. **Jal Saheli of Bundelkhand** of Uttar Pradesh has become a ray of hope at the time of water crisis. A movement led by Sumitra shiva and many women have joined water 'sahelis' to fix water woes as major water

³⁵IshrathHumairah, *the Bishnois, India's original environmentalists, who inspired the Chipko movement*, <https://ecologise.in/2017/05/28/the-bishnois-indias-original-environmentalists-who-inspired-the-chipko-movement/>.

³⁶SaranyaChakrapani, *how 20,000 women in Vellore got together to save a dying river*, THE TIMES OF INDIA, June 19,2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/how-20000-women-in-vellore-got-together-to-save-a-dying-river/articleshow/69850795.cms>.

reservoir, wells are dry in that area.³⁷ These women have played a great role for water conservation and have made aware of rainwater harvesting and connected to wells which are used for other household works like for washing clothes, the animal can drink water from it. Today the entire village have water. Hence, women have redefined the concept of patriarchy limits to what they can do and today they have changed the scenario of many villages. They are going home to home for awareness of how to save water and had made a kitchen garden so that water used in kitchen can reach field which helps in cultivating crops. They are known as Pani Panchayat. Another great example is of Madhulika Chaudhary, who is known as the "Lady of the Lakes," has transformed the deplorable Nekkampur Lake into a biodiversity hotspot. Her NGO is on a quest to save Hyderabad's water bodies. On the Nekkampur Lake, her team created a 2,500-square-foot floating island with around 3500 wetland plants that serves as a floating treatment wetland for the lake, which carried over 35000 samplings on it.³⁸ They have also contributed to Yerrakunta Lake, also known as Shaikpet Lake. In the last two years, their efforts at Nekkampur Lake have won them three State awards and three National awards.³⁹ Therefore, women have devoted a significant portion of their lives in environmental management.

A growing body of these evidences shows that water conservation can be more effective when women participate. Considering the significance of involving women in global water and sanitation management, several international agreements have begun to recognise women's voice and participation in regional, national, and international policies, beginning with the 1977 United Nations Water Conference in Mar del Plata, **the International Drinking Water and Sanitation Decade (1981-1990)** and **the International Conference on Water and the Environment in Dublin (January 1992)** both recognise the

³⁷ DD NEWS REPORT, *Jal Saheli' group to work jointly for water conservation in Bundelkhand*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWoTOMk_O_A.

³⁸ Syed Mhammad, *floating island to clean up Nekkampur Lake*, THE HINDU, February, 3 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Hyderabad/floating-island-to-clean-up-neknampur-lake/article22644879.ece>

³⁹ Priyanka Pashupuleti, *On a mission to clean up lakes*, TELANGANA TODAY, January 27, 2020, <https://telanganatoday.com/on-a-mission-to-clean-up-lakes>.

central role of women in the provision, management, and protection of water.⁴⁰

Several environmental issues are addressed in **the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979)**, an international “bill of rights” for women.⁴¹ Similarly, **the Beijing Platform for Action**, which was developed as a result of the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), has a whole chapter dedicated to women and the environment.⁴² It foreshadowed the disparities in the effects of global warming on men and women, which are now apparent all over the world. There are major environmental treaties that recognise the importance of women and their unique role in management, such as **the United Nations Earth Summit (UNCED)** in 1992, which established two important conventions on biological diversity and desertification that have served as guides for implementation of environmental actions from a gender perspective.⁴³ A chapter on gender and women's participation in water management was included in Agenda 21. Women's participation and involvement in water-related development efforts are also encouraged by the resolution creating the International Decade for Action, 'Water for Life' (2005-2015).⁴⁴ **The 2015 Paris Agreement** included a special provision for women's empowerment, acknowledging that they are disproportionately impacted.⁴⁵ All of this has emphasised how women have a role to play in protecting natural resources, implying that women in both developing and developed countries have a greater role to play and participation

⁴⁰DR. JANNI ARAGON & DR. MARIEL MILLER, GLOBAL WOMEN'S ISSUES: WOMEN IN THE WORLD TODAY, (United States Department of State publishers, 2012).

⁴¹*Id.*

⁴² Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action The Fourth World Conference on Women, Having met in Beijing, September 4-15, 1995, https://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/Beijing_Declaration_and_Platform_for_Action.pdf

⁴³Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, (June 3-14, 1992) Agenda 21, <https://www.un.org/esa/dsd/agenda21/Agenda%2021.pdf>.

⁴⁴ International decade for action, *Water for Life*, (2005- 2015), <https://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/gender.shtml>.

⁴⁵ Mary Halton, *Supra* note 6.

in environmental decision-making processes.⁴⁶ It is becoming more widely accepted that women should play an important role in water management and that this role can be strengthened by implementing a gender mainstreaming strategy, especially in the national policies.

VI. Eco-Feminism: A Branch of Feminist Theory

It is claimed by the supporters of this theory that if we apply ecofeminism theory to solve the crisis by providing proper awareness and training to women, we will be able to solve it. According to this theory, women are more deeply linked to nature than men because they have a similar life-giving process, which inspires ecofeminism as a political movement to combat environmental degradation. We have witnessed how they have timely raised their voices against environmental degradation like Chipko movement by Vandana Shiva, Narmada BachaoAndolan by Medha Patkar etc.

Ecofeminism is based on a certain fundamental claim that environmental degradation and social injustice are caused by a hierarchical mindset. On the basis of a value hierarchy in which men are considered superior and civilised while women and nature are considered uncivilised and inferior, women and nature may be marginalised because they share a subordinate relationship with men. Ecofeminist argues that this way of thought is the source of sexism and environmental injustice. To address environmental degradation, we must challenge value hierarchical ways of thinking and frameworks. For example, capitalism is a central cause of environmental injustices exploited and destroyed by the industrial world system, and fighting against capitalism is necessary to address environmental destruction and poverty. Under the grab of development, nature has been exploited mercilessly and women's special knowledge of nature has been slaughtered with modern technology. Vandana Shiva has branded modern science as western and inherently masculine therefore destructive in nature.⁴⁷ Ecofeminism arose in the 1970s in response to a growing awareness of

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ Manisha Rao, *Ecofeminism at the crossroads in India: A review*, ISSN 1824 - 448, https://www.unive.it/pag/fileadmin/user_upload/dipartimenti/DSLCC/documenti/DEP/numeri/n20/13_20_-Rao_Ecofeminism.pdf.

women's relationship with nature. Ecofeminist movements exist all over the world that are devoted to the continuation of life on Earth. However, the idea of ecofeminism sheds light on women's position, stating that giving birth is the source of a biological connection to nature's life-giving processes. Due to their close relationship with nature, they bear direct responsibility for the healthy planet's and from these movements their voices have been timely raised and heard against such degradation.⁴⁸

VII. Conclusion and Suggestions

With unprecedented drought and a rise in urbanisation, industrialization, and massive population growth in the last century, have added more challenges to depleted water resources in India. Undoubtedly, 2025 is not far away but with the help of women, we can overcome this crisis. They have a significant role to play in environmental management because they account for half of the population; and in most developing countries, they are the primary resource managers for their families and are extremely dependent on available natural resources. Due to their close connection with their local environment and often suffer most directly from environmental problems.

However, if we see Aristotle's thought on women that women were inferior to men and do not hold capability like men,⁴⁹ is a wrong and mistaken theory as women's capabilities have been witnessed in India how peasant women who never went to school changed the country's policy and became experts in biodiversity conservation.

Although women play a critical role in managing natural resources, they are underrepresented in environmental decision-making processes. Women must be empowered, and their voices must be heard in policy and planning and their experiences and perspectives can be very useful for sustainable development policymaking and actions at all levels to avoid a storm of water shortages and food insecurity in future.

Suggestions:

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ Francis Sparshott, *Aristotle on*

Women, <https://orb.binghamton.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1106&context=sagp>.

1. **Involve women in decision-making:** We need to increase women voice in environmental decision-making and work with them on water supply regulation projects. Water and sanitation will not be the last question on women's minds if they are included in the decision-making process; it will be her priority.
2. **Educate, train them and more investment:** We need to educate and train women in the importance of water management, water conservation methods, technological advances and sustainable farming practise in order to protect the environment further; as it is true, if we educate one woman, we educate the entire family, as they ensure that the knowledge is passed down in the family, which will create awareness for future generations. Investment in water policies is required.⁵⁰ However, water supply, received a boost in the union budget in 2021, with Rs 50,000 crore allocated to the launch of the Jal Jeevan Mission⁵¹ which aims to provide tap water connections to 2.86 crore households.⁵²

Hence, to protect the environment from further degradation, we need to involve women as they possess the power for change.

⁵⁰ Greta Gaard, *Women, water, energy: an ecofeminist approach*, 161 Vol. 14, No. 2 (2001), ORGANIZATION AND ENVIRONMENT, 157, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26161568>.

⁵¹ BUSINESS STANDARD REPORT, *Budget 2021: FM Sitharaman allocates Rs 50K crore for Jal Jeevan Mission*, February 2, 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/budget/article/budget-2021-fm-sitharaman-allocates-rs-50k-crore-for-jal-jeevan-mission-121020101568_1.html

⁵² *Id.*