



Water, Sanitation & Women's Rights

This article is based on [“Women must be centre-stage in water and sanitation”](#) which was published in The Hindustan Times on 31/12/2020. It talks about the interlinkages between water, sanitation & women's rights.

The right to water and sanitation is recognised as fundamental to attaining all other human rights. However, globally, 2.1 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water at home, and 2.3 billion do not have basic sanitation and 1 billion still practice open defecation.

Amongst this, women are the most vulnerable section. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by the lack of access to essential water, sanitation and hygiene facilities.

Women are largely responsible for household water, sanitation and hygiene management; they bear a disproportionate burden when these basic services are lacking, and face health, security and psychological vulnerabilities due to inadequate access and decision-making control.

Therefore, access to water and sanitation, if delivered well, empowers women economically and socially. Done poorly, it may undermine women's position at home and in the community.

Interconnection: Water, Sanitation & Hygiene With Women's Rights

- **Women's Water-Fetching Responsibility:** Women and girls are responsible for fetching water in most households where a drinking water source is off-premises.
 - This practice has implications for women's health, workloads, and caloric expenditure.
 - When girls carry water over long distances, the time available to them to pursue education is reduced.
 - Water-fetching responsibilities also add to the burden of **unpaid domestic work**, decrease time towards other income-generating activities, and affect leisure and nonessential activities.
- **Sanitation Access and Gender-Based Violence:** There is enough evidence of sanitation-related gender-based violence, highlighting a range of vulnerabilities women and girls face who are forced to defecate openly.
 - This leads to the fear of sexual violence that can restrict freedom of movement and affect equal opportunities.
- **Women's Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Needs:** Women have an increased need for water for hydration, sanitation and hygiene during menstruation, pregnancy, the postnatal period, and caring for sick family members or young children.
 - When these basic needs are not met, women and girls are unable to participate equally in society.
- **Linkage With SDGs:** The [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) make an essential initial step in connecting water, sanitation and hygiene (SDG 6) and gender equality and empowerment

(SDG 5) through target 6.2.

- Target 6.2 of SDG emphasises '**access to equitable sanitation and hygiene and women and girls**' needs.
- Further, SDG 10 aims to **reduce inequalities within and between countries**. Equal access to clean water and sanitation is critical to reducing overall disparities.

Associated Challenges

- **Lack of Women's Participation in Decision-making:** The central role of women and girls in the procurement and management of water, sanitation and hygiene at the household level is recognised.
 - However, women's water, sanitation & hygiene governance and household decision-making control over such resources are scarce.
 - For example, women not being consulted in decisions taken on sanitation-related matters such as the building and using toilets. It also fails to take into account the prevalent socio-cultural norms.
- **Lack of Data:** Measurement of the burden placed on women and girls, the opportunity costs of these burdens, and female empowerment related to water, sanitation and hygiene decision-making and autonomy are limited.
- **Lack of Adequate Infrastructure:** In many parts of India (especially in rural India) water, sanitation and hygiene in health-care facilities are far from adequate.
 - In schools, the lack of necessary infrastructure, privacy, spaces, materials and guidance to manage menstruation has been associated with harassment, sexual exploitation, psychosocial impacts, decreased school attendance rates and drop-out for girls.

Way Forward

- **Gender-Neutral Approach:** There is a need for the political imperative to recognise that both women and men's involvement are integral to sustainable water, sanitation, and hygiene management.
- **Policy Framework for Women Leadership:** Women's leadership and decision making power in water and sanitation is critical. Therefore, enabling policy frameworks backed by resources, training and political will, are vital to developing and sustaining women's leadership in the water sector at the local, national and global level.
 - In this context, there is a need to invest in developing the next generation of water, sanitation and hygiene leaders, by collaborating with colleges, water utilities and districts, using experiential learning, internships and interacting with experts.
- **Sustained Focus on Swachh Bharat Mission:** The rallying call of the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) campaign of "Satyagraha se Swachhagraha" has led to the significant change in sanitation habits in India.
 - The next SBM phase should envisage finding solutions for sustained behaviour change, addressing women and their hygiene needs.
- **Role of Society:** As the women already spend 2.6 times more hours than men on unpaid activities, including caregiving and domestic work.
 - Citizenry as a part of society to ensure their involvement in water and sanitation services does not further contribute to the burden of unpaid work, or decrease the ability to earn an income.
- **Role of SHGs:** There are rapidly increasing examples throughout the country, with women being able to push through reforms through the help of support groups or community-led efforts.
 - Therefore, women SHG should be promoted to take up the cause of water, sanitation and Hygiene.
 - In this context, Jharkhand's example is worth emulating. Trained women masons built over

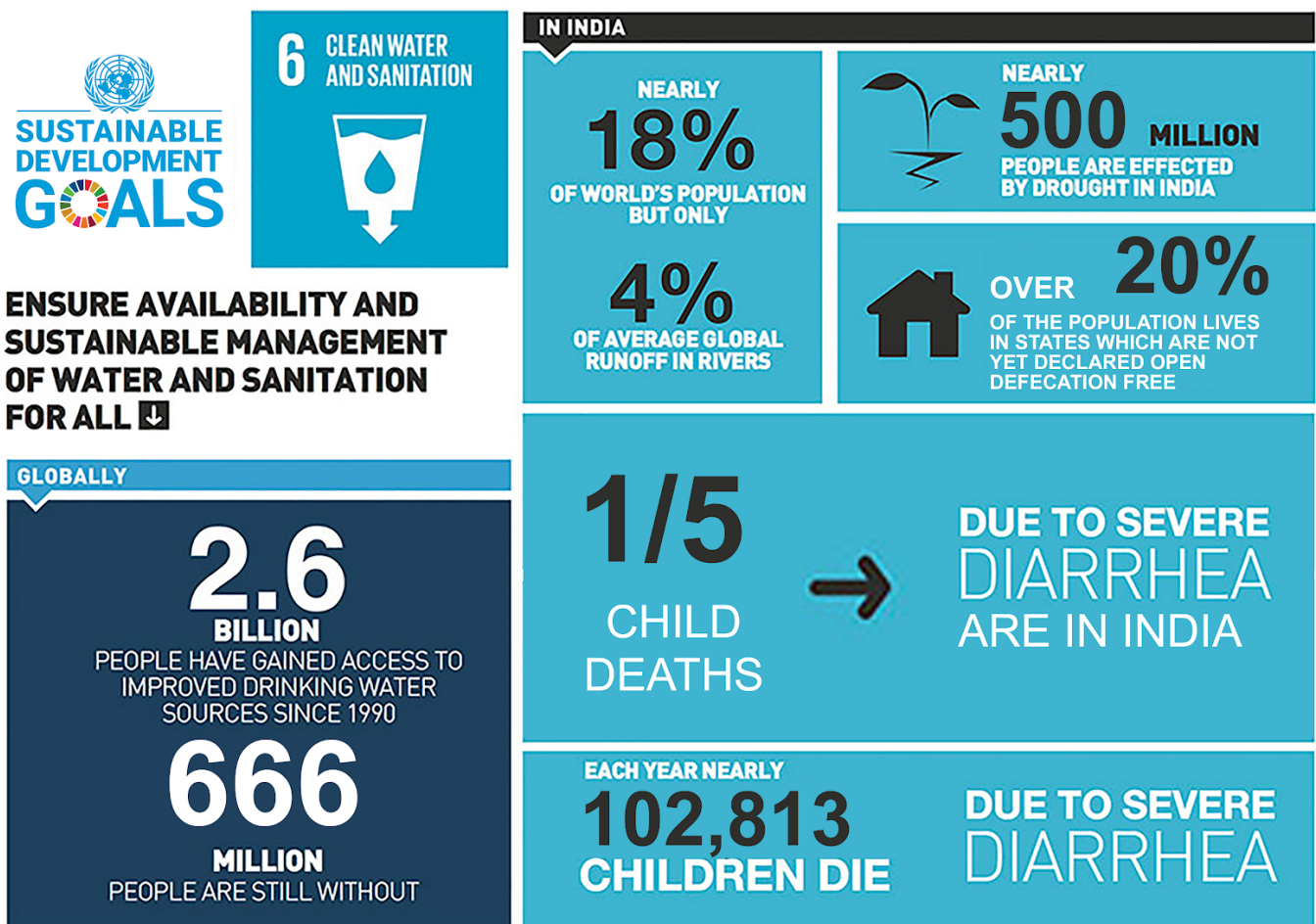
15 lakh toilets in one year and the state was declared open defecation free (rural) much ahead of the national cut-off date of October 2, 2019.

Conclusion

As countries work to achieve SDG 10, access to clean water and sanitation can be a game-changer for prosperity and transformation. Policies on water and sanitation need to keep women centre-stage needs and enable them to be agents of change.

This is the time for governments, businesses, NGOs and academic institutions to look at how they are investing in women's leadership in the water, sanitation and hygiene sector, from local committees to the international stage.

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Drishti Mains Question

Access to water and sanitation, if delivered well, empowers women economically and socially. Done poorly, it may undermine women's position at home and in the community. Comment.

This editorial is based on "[Himalayan manoeuvres](#)" which was published in The Hindu on December 31st, 2020. Now watch this on our Youtube channel.

