Water Crisis in India – Gendered Realities, Social Distress, and Policy Imperatives

Mains: *GS III – Water scarcity*

Why in News?

India is facing an acute freshwater crisis and the issue is even bigger when it comes to gender disparities in water catastrophe.

What is the nature and extent of water crisis in India?

- **Water scarcity in India** – It is both physical and economic in nature.
- According to global benchmarks, water scarcity occurs when annual per capita availability falls below 1,000 cubic metres.
- India is fast approaching this threshold.
- **Challenges** – Despite significant improvements in access to drinking water—from around 80% coverage in the early 2000s to nearly 95% today—serious challenges remain:
  - Around 600 million people face water stress.
  - Nearly 200,000 deaths annually are linked to inadequate access to safe water.
  - Rural-urban disparities persist, with rural areas lagging behind urban regions in reliable water access.
  - Moreover, access does not guarantee functionality.
  - Many households with tap connections still depend on alternative sources due to irregular supply or poor infrastructure.
- **Water scarcity & Gender norms** – India's water crisis represents a complex intersection of environmental stress, socio-economic inequality, and deeply embedded gender norms.
- With 18% of the world's population but only 4% of its freshwater resources, the country faces mounting pressure on its water systems.
- **Future challenges** – Per capita water availability is projected to decline to the scarcity threshold of 1,000 cubic metres by 2050, signaling a severe challenge to sustainable development.
- While the crisis affects all sections of society, its impacts are uneven, with women bearing a disproportionate burden due to structural inequalities and traditional gender roles.

What are the socio-economic dimensions of water scarcity?

- **Rural-urban divide –** Urban areas benefit from better infrastructure and governance

systems, while rural populations often rely on distant and unreliable sources.

- **Poverty and inequality –** Low-income households spend a higher proportion of their income on securing clean water, often purchasing it from private vendors.
- **Health implications –** Water scarcity exacerbates water-borne diseases, particularly in drought- and flood-prone areas, affecting vulnerable populations disproportionately.
- **Education disruptions –** Children, especially in drought-affected regions, are frequently withdrawn from schools to assist in water collection, contributing to increased dropout rates.

What is the gendered dimensions of water scarcity?

- **Women as primary water collectors –** Data indicates that women are responsible for water collection in nearly 71% of rural households.
- This unpaid labour consumes significant time and energy:
- Many women spend 30–40 minutes daily fetching water.
- This translates into a substantial loss of productive economic time annually.
- **Physical and emotional strain –** Long distances, unsafe routes, and heavy loads lead to:
    - Musculoskeletal issues
    - Fatigue and stress
    - Increased vulnerability to harassment and violence
- **Impact on agency and opportunities –** Time spent fetching water limits women's participation in:
    - Education
    - Paid employment
    - Community decision-making
- **The water wives phenomena –** In drought-prone regions of Maharashtra, a disturbing practice has emerged where men marry multiple women—often widows or economically vulnerable individuals—to increase household capacity for water collection.
- These “water wives”:
    - Lack marital rights and inheritance.
    - Are treated primarily as labour providers.
    - Reflect the commodification of women under resource stress.
- **Sugarcane cultivation and gender exploitation –** Sugarcane, a water-intensive crop, dominates agriculture in certain drought-prone areas.
- Female migrant workers in these regions face:
    - Long hours of agricultural labour
    - Additional domestic responsibilities, including water collection
    - Lack of sanitation facilities
- This has led to severe health consequences, including reproductive health issues and, in extreme cases, hysterectomies. This highlights the prioritisation of commercial agriculture over local water needs.
- **Women as agents of change –** Despite systemic disadvantages, women are not merely victims but active agents in water management:
    - **Collective Action –** Women farmers in Maharashtra have demanded equitable access to irrigation water.

    - Community-based initiatives have challenged male-dominated water governance structures.
    - **Grassroots Leadership –** Groups like “jal sahelis” (water friends) have revived traditional water bodies.
    - Women in Himalayan regions have led efforts to rejuvenate drying springs.
    - These examples demonstrate women's knowledge, leadership, and capacity in sustainable water management.

What are the policy landscape and gaps?

- **Government initiatives –** Programs such as the Jal Jeevan Mission aim to provide tap water connections to all households.
- **Remaining gaps** – Functionality and reliability of water supply
- Lack of gender-sensitive implementation
- **Missing gender perspective –** Most water and agricultural policies focus on:
    - Efficiency
    - Productivity
    - Output
- **Ignored factors**
- Women’s unpaid labour
- Their role as farmers and water managers
- Structural barriers like land ownership and decision-making power

What are the need for gender-responsive water governance?

- **Recognising women’s role –** Policies must acknowledge women as:
    - Primary stakeholders
    - Knowledge holders
    - Decision-makers
- **Institutional reforms –** Ensure women’s participation in water governance bodies
- Improve land ownership rights
- Integrate gender budgeting in water policies
- **Reducing unpaid labour –** Invest in local water infrastructure
- Promote decentralized water systems
- Ensure reliable household-level supply
- **Sustainable agricultural practices –** Shift away from water-intensive crops in drought-prone areas
- Promote crop diversification and water-efficient irrigation methods

What lies ahead?

- India’s water crisis is not merely an environmental issue but a deeply social and gendered challenge.
- It exposes systemic inequalities in access, control, and decision-making.
- Women, while disproportionately burdened, also represent a powerful force for change.
- Effective solutions must therefore go beyond infrastructure and incorporate gender-responsive governance, equitable resource distribution, and recognition of women’s

agency.
- Only through such an integrated approach can India move towards sustainable and inclusive water security.

Reference

The Indian Express| Water Scarcity & Dimensions

