



## **Full Length Research Article**

### **SOCIAL EXCLUSION OF WOMEN IN WATER GOVERNANCE: AN EXPERIENCES OF VILLAGES**

**Ilavarasi, S.**

Ph. D Scholar (UGC – NET –SRF), UGC – SRF Scholar, Dept. of Women's Studies, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli

#### **ARTICLE INFO**

##### **Article History:**

Received 15<sup>th</sup> February, 2016  
Received in revised form  
28<sup>th</sup> March, 2016  
Accepted 17<sup>th</sup> April, 2016  
Published online 31<sup>st</sup> May, 2016

##### **Key Words:**

Women,  
Water,  
Water governance,  
Patriarchy,  
Exclusion.

#### **ABSTRACT**

Water is the common resource for life-sustaining and right of all human beings. It is essential to the livelihoods and well-being of the world's population of human and animals. But water has been under crisis in access, distribution, optimum utility and affordability in recent days where water has become a commercial-cum-commodity in market. In India, though the country has hundreds of rivers flows through both perennial and interstate. The irony is that millions people at different social status suffer from lack of access to clean, safe drinking water, inadequate water for food production due to the continuing effects of pollution, environment and climate change. Erratic monsoon, encroachment and poor management of water bodies and unaware of new creation of water resources have resulted in uncritical about the water governance. The consequences of the water governance have contributed to un/underemployment as the result of agricultural failure in the rural parts of the country which led to migration, food insecurity, poor sanitation and public health and above all feminization of poverty and labour is unforeseen in the policy dimensions. Poor governance and improper management of water resources pushed village poor people from native to migrate the nearby cities in search of jobs; whereas women and girls are trudging still further (NCW, 2005). Water has been central to the politics of development by widening the gulf between powerful and powerless in the name of caste, class, gender and market. The imbalanced of power relationship has marginalized women and children by making them more vulnerable to access. Social exclusion of women in participation from the water management and governance worsens their access, maintenance and asserting rights on water even though they are closely associated in the process of collecting, using and conserving. The embedded gender discrimination in public and private spheres of society directly or indirectly alienate women from owning the resources in general, natural resources in particular i.e. water.

*Copyright©2016, Ilavarasi. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.*

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Water is the common resource for life-sustaining and right of all human beings. It is essential to the livelihoods and well-being of the world's population of human and animals. But water has been under crisis in access, distribution, optimum utility and affordability in recent days where water has become a commercial-cum-commodity in market. In India, though the country has hundreds of rivers flows through both perennial and interstate. The irony is that millions people at different social status suffer from lack of access to clean, safe drinking water, inadequate water for food production due to the continuing effects of pollution, environment and climate change. Erratic monsoon, encroachment and poor management of water bodies and unaware of new creation of water

resources have resulted in uncritical about the water governance. The consequences of the water governance have contributed to un/underemployment as the result of agricultural failure in the rural parts of the country which led to migration, food insecurity, poor sanitation and public health and above all feminization of poverty and labour is unforeseen in the policy dimensions. Poor governance and improper management of water resources pushed village poor people from native to migrate the nearby cities in search of jobs; whereas women and girls are trudging still further (NCW, 2005). Water has been central to the politics of development by widening the gulf between powerful and powerless in the name of caste, class, gender and market. The imbalanced of power relationship has marginalized women and children by making them more vulnerable to access. Social exclusion of women in participation from the water management and governance worsens their access, maintenance and asserting

**\*Corresponding author: Ilavarasi, S.**

UGC – SRF Scholar, Dept. of Women's Studies, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli

rights on water even though they are closely associated in the process of collecting, using and conserving. The embedded gender discrimination in public and private spheres of society directly or indirectly alienate women from owning the resources in general, natural resources in particular i.e. water.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research paper aims to explore how women are facing the struggles to access water and in what ways they are socially been excluded from taking part in water governance and management system in the continuing gendered patriarchal society at village level, based on primary source of data collected from Cauvery river basin's Thiruvasi (wet land) and Ayyamplayam (dry land) villages of Manachanallur block of Tiruchirappalli district, Tamil Nadu. This is to understand the relationship between of women, water and gendered social exclusion in different climatic region both dry and wet villages were chosen for research by using systematic random sampling. From each village 50 women were selected as respondents. Households who own predominately dry and wet villages are depending on agriculture and animal husbandry for their livelihood. Households in wet village rely on river and canals; dry area farmers depending up on ponds, wells, tube and bore wells to meet their irrigational and drinking water needs. Water has been the primary resource to ensure livelihood sustainability of people in these two villages.

### Water an unshared burden to Women

In almost all the society, water collection is considered as a primary responsibility of women; collecting, using and storing for the purpose of fulfilling domestic needs. Due to the water scarcity and with the stereotypic roles of women in rural areas they walk long miles and cities they wait long hours to bring water for drinking and cleaning needs of their families. The water crisis translates into an increasing burden for women as water providers (NCW, 2005).

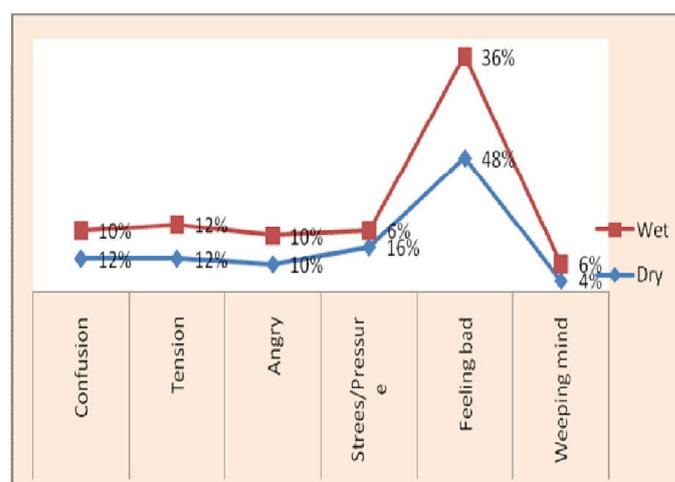
**Table 1. Division of Labour & its Impacts in Water Collection**

Division of Labour*	Dry	Wet
Myself (Respondents)	47 (94%)	43 (86%)
Husband	4 (8%)	0
Daughter	13 (26%)	5 (10%)
Son	7 (14%)	2 (4%)
Mother-in-law	2 (4%)	2 (4%)
Daughter-in-law	2 (4%)	6 (12%)
Mother	1 (2%)	1 (2%)
Grand daughter	1 (2%)	0
Impacts*	Dry	Wet
Unable to take food in time	29 (90%)	5 (50%)
Extending time of household work	8 (2%)	5 (41%)
Extending time of household work	8 (2%)	5 (41%)
Unable to care children	5 (15%)	4 (33%)
Late for cooking	23 (7%)	11 (91%)
Late for work / Lost employment	11 (34%)	0

\*-Multiple Responses

Also the water crisis affects the socio-economic conditions and positions of the women. Waiting and walking for long hours, distance for water collection affect their routine activities and make them exhausted. Accessing water restrain women to spend significantly less time in taking care of their personal development and prevent them to participate in the

formal social and community reproduction. Women spend most of their time for collecting water with little time for other productive work (NCW, 2005). Women and men assume distinct responsibilities in using and managing water. Women and girls collect every litre of water for cooking, bathing, cleaning, washing clothes, maintaining health and hygiene, raising small livestock and growing food (GWA, 2003). Irrespective of area, both in studied village the research participants i.e. women expressed that they were involved themselves (Dry 94%: Wet 86%) in water collection for their household needs. At the time of illness only their water collection was shared by their family's female members (Dry50%: Wet 56%) like daughter, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, grand -daughter and next of kin who are girls. Besides that they have pointed out due to this kind of gender division of labour women were pressurized not to take food in right time and take care of children, extending the time of household chores; especially in dry area women lost their daily wage since could not be on time for work. However, whether water is near or far, women have the responsibility to fetch and carry water for domestic uses and men mostly do not involve in fetching water for domestic needs because it is considered as a 'feminine' duty (Sultana 2009, PMO-RALG 2006). The kind of gendered notions i.e. responsibilities associated with water force women to experience either invisible or immeasurable miseries.



**Figure 1. Psychological problems**

Women significantly from the dry and wet areas encountered various kinds of psychological problems such as confusion, tension, angry, weeping mind, Stress/Pressure feeling bad whenever they were water scarcity and water crisis (Figure:1) and physical problems while collecting water such as chest pain, headache, fatigue, waist and leg pain. (Figure:2). It reflects the argument of Thompson (2003) such as women and children continue to walk from the source, carrying water on their heads, as a consequence, they are prone to health problems such as headaches, general fatigue and pains in the chest, neck and waist. In addition, decreasing the water table level of ground water resources in the studied villages has added their burden as economically. Significant proportion of women (Dry:95%:Wet52%) acknowledged that they had primarily depended on common property resources (CPRs) like ponds, rivers and grazing lands for their livestock

management since long but presently the quality and quantity of CPRs are deteriorated due to improper maintenance these resources. The depletion of CPRs also made them to depend more on market sources for getting inputs for livestock management. This trend was drastically present in wet village and also emerged as a new phenomenon in dry village than earlier. Due to acute drought in dry village and shortage of rain fall in Cauvery river basin wet village, and poor maintenance as well as shrinking of CPRs, women are compelled to access market sources for their livestock management resulting in increased economic burden. In these villages, livestock management is considered as a secondary occupation again they are directly or indirectly under the pressure to lose their secondary employment and spend more time and money to collect water, fodder and other things which are needed for livestock management. This situation makes women as economically dependent the market as well as burdensome.



Figure2: Physical Problems

### Gender and Social Exclusion

Naturally women are closely associated with the sectors of water i.e., Domestic, Productive and Environment as drawers, users and managers but women's involvement in water related issues like local management of irrigation committee, farmers associations are either limited or excluded as this is considered as a field of expertise to men. This continues to be dominated by men where women's concerns are less heeded, scarcely addressed or absent in most of the situations because of their power relations in society (Shiva, 1988).

In the respective villages women do not possess any land entitlement jointly or individually. Absence of landholding is closely intertwined with their knowledge on water table, condition of village water reservoirs/sheds, water management committee, ground water exploitation, commercialization of water and water taxation. Majority of the respondents from both the wet and dry villages are unaware about the ground water table (Dry 92%: Wet90%). Majority of the women (Dry 78% : Wet 96%) are not involved in any kind of discussions and meeting related to water resource management within their own household as well as community. Since, many of decisions pertaining to water management are taken by the local governing institution i.e. *panchayat/ gramashaba* (which is men's domain) where women are unable to participate in

decision making process. They added that due to the reasons like household responsibilities, uninformed of meeting time, lack of knowledge on *gramashaba* and least importance given by the male members to hear or response the women's voices usually women were marginalized and unable to participate in water related policies or project planning. Projects and programmes, which neglect indigenous management and treat women as beneficiaries and users, and not as water managers and decision makers, thus hamper their results and diminish women's position (Cecilia Tortajada 2000). However, women of dry and wet villages actively participated whenever the primary drinking water resource i.e. street taps were repaired through lodging complaints to *panchayat* office, make efforts to immediate intervention and some time spare the maintenance cost based on the emergency needs. But in the case of maintenance of community based water reservoirs women's participation was nil; they were never consulted in any decision making process except using the village womenfolk as supportive assistants during renovation / reconstruction and digging of ponds and common village rain water harvesting system construction etc, Each and every matter pertained that was either dictated or decided by male counterparts of the village.

In this process women are never informed and consulted, very meager numbers of women have access to mere information only. No women were aware on village watershed management committee, norms to form the committee and its functions. Also the participation of women in water management affairs was very negligible and they were ignored by the *panchayat* leadership even though women are rightful citizens, voters, water providers and who are facing everyday water crisis than men. Women are deliberately excluded from decision-making processes on water and sanitation despite being the most affected by it (Brewster, M. et. al. (2006). Without effective involvement of women in local planning (particularly in water affairs) sustainable development will be a question. By this kind of gendered division of practices existed in public and private spheres of the society leads to alienation of women from the social and community reproduction. The masculine approaches to representing and exclusion of women from water management and governance tend to priorities of the men's control as well as their perspectives and concerns. The gendered perceptions related to public private divide drawn by the society leads to separation of women from water needs, governance, management and maintenance of water bodies, and forcing women to be as domestic water user and men for production in all spheres.

### Conclusion

Hence policy perceptions have emerged based on this gendered conception where men are in the domain of productive water users such as agriculture, industry and other major activities and women are in the sphere of domestic users only. Because of this misconception women are not included in the bodies of water governance. Hierarchical Power driven patriarchal mind set with caste hegemony and control over women, *dalits* and marginalized persons prevent these excluded mass to access the basic domestic water rights such as drinking and sanitation in many parts of rural India.

Despite the ongoing efforts to include all the stakeholders through gender mainstreaming approaches, women are still in periphery of macro and micro decision making process or most of the time excluded from the entire process in the name of maintaining superiority over the caste, class and gender. Particularly in micro level planning institutions like *panchayats/gramasabha* women's voices, knowledge, views, experience are never taken into account and their rights to expression denied especially in water affairs. This kind of continuing practices of "masculinity in water" and "exclusion of women" in water affairs. Indeed, due to the existence of gender and masculine nature of mindset and practices in social institutions will ignore the women's knowledge, concerns and also alienating women from the governing process who are the key stakeholder of water as collectors, consumers and conservers. Hence there is an urgent need to relook and reconstruct the social institutions' approaches and functions beyond the gendered ideologies in inclusive perspective, otherwise it will channels to poor/bad water governance in one way, on the other seriously affect the future of women and children at all levels of life as well as the development of nation as a whole.

## REFERENCES

Brewster, M. et al. 2006. A Gender Perspective on Water Resources and Sanitation. *Wagadu*, 3: 1-23.

Gender and Water Alliance and United Nations Development Programme, 2006. *Mainstreaming Gender in Water Management*, New York

National Commission for Women, 2005. *Women and Water*, New Delhi.

PMO-RALG (Prime Minister's Office-Regional Administration and Local Government), 2006. *Integration of Women and Gender Issues in Local Government Reform in Tanzania*.

Shiva, Vandana, 1988. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*. New Delhi: *Kali for Women*.

Sultana, Farhana, 2009. Fluid Lives: Subjectivities, Gender and Water in Rural Bangladesh. *Gender, Place & Culture* 16 (4): 427-444.

Thompson, John, Ina T. Porras, Munguti Katui-Katua, Mark R. Mujwahuzi, and James J. Tumwine 2003. Drawers of Water II: Assessing Change in Domestic Water Use in East Africa. *Waterlines* 22 (1): 22-25.

Tortajada, C (ed.), 2000. *Women and Water Management: The Latin American Experience*. New Delhi. *Oxford University Press*.

\*\*\*\*\*