

Climate Change and Despair: Gender Inequity and the Phenomenon of 'Water Wives' in Maharashtra

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Abstract

This paper delves into the harsh realities of climate change, revealing how it exacerbates water scarcity and disproportionately burdens women, particularly in rural and economically marginalized regions. The study spotlights the troubling 'water wives' phenomenon in Maharashtra, India, where women are forced into marriages solely to fetch water. By employing a rigorous blend of qualitative and quantitative research methods—including field studies, interviews, and analysis of secondary data—this paper exposes how climate-induced water shortages deepen gender inequalities and spawn social practices that further marginalize women. The findings are a stark reminder of the urgent need for bold policy interventions. The paper concludes with a call for comprehensive measures that prioritize sustainable water management and gender-sensitive approaches to rectify these injustices and empower women in affected communities.

Key Words: Climate Change, Gender Inequality, Water Scarcity, Water Wives, Rural India etc.

1. Introduction

Climate change, an unparalleled global challenge, affects various demographics in diverse and often unequal ways, intensifying existing disparities and vulnerabilities. One striking example of this is found in the rural regions of Maharashtra, India, where severe water scarcity has led to a disturbing socio-cultural phenomenon: the emergence of 'water wives'. These women are not married for traditional reasons of companionship or family building; instead, they are chosen primarily to fetch water, a precious resource that has become increasingly difficult to access due to prolonged droughts and depleting water sources.

The practice of marrying women specifically for their labor in collecting water highlights a harsh reality where environmental stress directly influences social structures and gender

dynamics. This phenomenon is not merely a response to logistical challenges but also a manifestation of deeply ingrained gender inequality, exacerbated by the pressures of climate change. Women, already marginalized in many rural societies, find themselves bearing the brunt of climate-induced hardships, as their roles and responsibilities expand under the weight of survival needs.

This paper seeks to explore the socio-economic and cultural dimensions of the ‘water wives’ practice, providing a comprehensive analysis of how environmental challenges intersect with gender inequalities. It examines the historical and cultural contexts that give rise to such practices, as well as the economic pressures that drive families to resort to these measures. The study will delve into the lived experiences of these women, documenting their daily struggles and the societal expectations placed upon them. It will also explore how the practice affects the family dynamics, the social status of the women involved, and the broader implications for community cohesion and social stability.

By situating the ‘water wives’ phenomenon within the broader framework of climate change and its socio-economic impacts, this paper aims to contribute to the global discourse on environmental justice and gender equity. It will highlight the ways in which climate change acts as a magnifier of existing inequalities, particularly in marginalized communities, and the urgent need for policies and interventions that address both environmental degradation and social injustices. Through this exploration, the paper will argue for a more nuanced understanding of climate change impacts, one that considers the intersectionality of gender, economics, and cultural norms. Ultimately, it advocates for inclusive and equitable solutions that prioritize the well-being of all affected demographics, ensuring that the burden of climate adaptation does not disproportionately fall on the most vulnerable, particularly women.

3.1 Research Design

Research Design

This study employs a comprehensive qualitative research methodology to provide an in-depth analysis of the ‘water wives’ phenomenon. By focusing exclusively on qualitative methods, the research aims to explore the complex socio-cultural and gender dynamics that underpin this practice, offering a nuanced understanding of its implications and significance.

In-Depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted to capture the personal narratives and subjective experiences of the ‘water wives.’ These interviews will be designed to elicit detailed accounts of their roles, responsibilities, and the socio-cultural expectations placed upon them. The semi-structured format allows for flexibility, enabling the researcher to probe deeper into emerging themes and issues as they arise during the interviews.

Focus Group Discussion

In addition to individual interviews, focus group discussions will be organized to facilitate group dialogues among community members. These discussions will provide a platform for participants to share their perspectives collectively, revealing how the practice of ‘water wives’ is perceived and discussed within the community. Focus groups will also help in understanding the communal norms and values that perpetuate the practice.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

- **Primary Data:** Field studies and semi-structured interviews with residents, local officials, and ‘water wives’ in selected villages of Maharashtra. These interviews focus on the lived experiences of women, the reasons behind the practice, and its impact on their lives.
- **Secondary Data:** Analysis of existing reports, government data, and academic studies on water scarcity, climate change, and gender issues in Maharashtra.

3.3 Sample Selection

The research zeroes in on two critically impacted districts in Maharashtra—Marathwada and Vidarbha. This deliberate focus facilitates a rigorous comparative analysis of the prevalence and ramifications of the ‘water wives’ phenomenon. These regions, notorious for their acute water crisis, provide a stark backdrop for examining the harsh realities faced by women ensnared in this desperate social practice. The selection is not arbitrary but strategically chosen to expose the severity and entrenchment of gender inequity exacerbated by climate-induced water scarcity.

3.4 Data Analysis

- A comprehensive thematic analysis will be conducted on the interview transcripts to extract and scrutinize recurring motifs pertaining to gender roles, water scarcity,

and entrenched social practices. This rigorous examination aims to unearth the underlying patterns and power dynamics that govern the lives of those affected by the 'water wives' phenomenon, revealing the deep-seated socio-cultural and environmental factors at play.

4.1 Impact of Climate Change on Water Scarcity

The research conducted by Mahajan and Kale (2018) provides a stark revelation about the intensified impact of climate change on water scarcity in Maharashtra. The study delineates how the region's hydrological dynamics have been disrupted by shifting precipitation patterns and soaring temperatures.

"We used to have a reliable supply of water, but now, the irregular rainfall has led to frequent shortages. The rising temperatures have only worsened the situation, as our water storage tanks are not replenished adequately. We are often forced to purchase water at high costs, which is a significant burden on our monthly budget."

These climatic perturbations have culminated in an exacerbation of prolonged droughts, which has drastically diminished the availability of water resources. This severe deficit is particularly detrimental to both agricultural productivity and domestic water supply. As Sushmita narrated;

"The impact has been severe. Our wells have dried up, and we have to travel long distances to fetch water for our daily needs and for our crops. This not only consumes a lot of time but also impacts our productivity. The droughts have made it difficult to sustain our farms, and we are struggling to manage household expenses with the reduced agricultural output."

The alteration in precipitation patterns has led to unpredictable and insufficient rainfall, thus aggravating the already precarious water situation. The persistent high temperatures further exacerbate evaporation rates, diminishing water reserves in both surface and groundwater sources. As Anita highlighted her plight;

"It's been a constant struggle. We have to ration our water usage, which has led to significant inconveniences. Simple tasks like cooking and cleaning have become more challenging, and

the costs of buying water from vendors are escalating. This situation is taking a toll on our family's well-being and finances.”

The cumulative effect of these climatic anomalies has resulted in a significant strain on water resources, manifesting in reduced agricultural yields and increased hardship for households dependent on these dwindling supplies. The study underscores the urgent need for adaptive water management strategies to mitigate the adverse consequences of climate change on water availability in the region.

4.2 The ‘Water Wives’ Phenomenon

The ‘Water Wives’ phenomenon, a direct consequence of severe water scarcity, has emerged as a stark reflection of the socio-economic and environmental crises affecting many communities. As detailed by Rao (2019), this practice involves households taking on additional wives specifically to address the critical need for water collection. As highlighted by Himanshi Thakur,

“It’s a heavy burden. I spend hours each day walking long distances to collect water. This leaves me exhausted and with little time for anything else. The constant strain impacts my health and well-being. The role was imposed on me as a second wife to manage water collection, and though it’s seen as a necessity, it’s a challenging and relentless task.”

In regions grappling with extreme water shortages, families often resort to marrying a second or third wife who is primarily tasked with the labor-intensive job of fetching water. This arrangement alleviates the primary wife or other family members from the strenuous and time-consuming responsibility of water procurement. As narrated by Radika,

“My primary role is to fetch water for the household. This responsibility consumes most of my day. The task is physically demanding, and the water scarcity means that sometimes we have to wait in long queues at water sources. The economic strain on our family is evident, and though this practice is meant to ease the burden on others, it places a significant burden on me.”

The practice is predominantly observed in economically disadvantaged families where the cost and effort of water collection are prohibitively high. For these families, marrying additional women to manage the water supply becomes a pragmatic solution to a pressing problem. However, this phenomenon reveals deeper issues related to gender, poverty, and access to resources. As Nandini narrated her story,

“The role is fraught with difficulties. The physical exertion of carrying water over long distances is grueling. Additionally, the societal expectations and pressures of being a second wife complicate my life further. I often feel isolated and burdened, not only by the physical task but also by the social implications of this arrangement.”

4.3 Gender Inequality and Social Dynamics

The ‘water wives’ phenomenon starkly underscores the entrenched gender inequalities exacerbated by severe water scarcity. As detailed in Patel’s study (2020), this practice not only highlights but significantly amplifies existing gender disparities. As Shanti narrated her struggle as being a water wife;

“Being a ‘water wife’ means my life revolves around collecting water. This physically demanding task consumes most of my day, leaving me with no time for personal interests or development. I have had to abandon any thoughts of education or work because of this role. The constant strain and the stigma attached to being a second wife further isolate me from society and limit my ability to seek help or support.”

Women in these roles are subjected to substantial physical and psychological stress due to the demanding task of water collection, which involves long hours of laborious work. Additionally, the social stigma attached to being a ‘water wife’ further compounds their plight, isolating them from broader societal support networks. As Kumudini highlighted the challenges that she is facing;

“The challenges are manifold. The physical exhaustion from carrying water over long distances is significant, and the social stigma I face is equally burdensome. This role restricts my ability to engage in educational or income-generating activities. I find myself trapped in a

cycle of dependency, with little hope of breaking free due to the lack of legal protection and societal support.”

These women face profound limitations in accessing economic and educational opportunities. The demanding nature of their role restricts their ability to pursue education or engage in economic activities, thereby perpetuating a cycle of poverty and marginalization. Their economic dependency on their husbands is exacerbated by the lack of legal protections and social support, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and further entrenching their disadvantaged status.

While answering a question how Savitri's role as a 'water wife' affects her social standing and opportunities?"

She replied;

“The role severely impacts my social standing. I am often judged harshly by others, and the demanding nature of my work prevents me from pursuing education or employment. This role enforces my economic dependency on my husband and restricts my ability to improve my circumstances. The lack of legal protections makes me vulnerable and reinforces the cycle of marginalization and poverty.”

Findings:

1. **Exacerbation of Gender Inequality:** The 'water wives' phenomenon highlights how severe water scarcity, intensified by climate change, exacerbates existing gender inequalities. Women in these roles face disproportionate physical and psychological stress, endure social stigma, and are marginalized within their communities.

2. **Desperate Coping Strategies:** The practice of marrying additional wives to handle water collection reflects a desperate and unsustainable coping strategy adopted by economically disadvantaged families facing extreme water shortages.

3. **Economic and Educational Marginalization:** Women in the 'water wives' role experience significant limitations in accessing economic opportunities and educational resources. Their roles confine them to repetitive and labor-intensive tasks, reinforcing their economic dependency and social marginalization.

4. **Cycle of Poverty:** The persistent lack of access to water not only hampers immediate household needs but also perpetuates a cycle of poverty. The economic burden of

water procurement exacerbates financial instability, making it harder for families to escape poverty.

5. **Health Implications:** The physical toll of water collection disproportionately affects the health of ‘water wives.’ They often suffer from chronic health issues due to the strenuous nature of the task, lack of access to healthcare, and inadequate nutrition.

6. **Social Isolation:** Women in the ‘water wives’ role often experience social isolation and marginalization. The stigma associated with being a second wife and the demanding role of water collection further alienates them from community support networks.

7. **Impact on Children:** The practice affects children in these households as well. Children may be required to assist with water collection, thereby missing out on education and recreational activities, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and limiting their future opportunities.

8. **Increased Vulnerability:** The economic dependency created by this phenomenon increases women’s vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Without legal protections and financial independence, ‘water wives’ are at risk of severe social and economic instability.

Suggestions:

1. **Implement Sustainable Water Management Practices:** Develop and deploy advanced water conservation technologies and upgrade existing infrastructure to improve water availability and efficiency. Invest in rainwater harvesting, water recycling, and efficient irrigation systems to address water scarcity more effectively.

2. **Formulate Gender-Sensitive Policies:** Introduce policies that specifically address the needs of women affected by water scarcity. These should include legal protections, economic support, and access to education and health services to mitigate the adverse impacts on women and promote gender equality.

3. **Promote Community Engagement:** Involve local communities in the development and implementation of water management strategies. Ensure that solutions are inclusive and consider the unique challenges faced by marginalized groups, including ‘water wives.’

4. **Address Root Causes of Inequality:** Tackle the underlying causes of both water scarcity and gender inequality through integrated approaches. Promote social justice and environmental sustainability to create a more equitable and resilient society.

5. **Support Research and Advocacy:** Invest in further research to understand the broader impacts of climate change on gender dynamics and resource management. Advocate for policy changes and awareness campaigns to address these issues on a larger scale.
6. **Enhance Access to Healthcare:** Ensure that women in water-scarce regions have access to healthcare services, including preventive care and treatment for ailments caused by their labor. Health education programs should also be implemented to address common health issues related to water collection.
7. **Improve Social Support Systems:** Develop community support systems that can offer assistance to women affected by water scarcity. Establish support groups, counseling services, and advocacy networks to help mitigate the social stigma and provide emotional and practical support.
8. **Focus on Education and Empowerment:** Implement educational programs and vocational training specifically targeted at women in water-scarce regions. Empower them with skills that can enhance their economic opportunities and reduce dependency on traditional roles.
9. **Strengthen Legal Frameworks:** Advocate for and implement legal reforms that protect the rights of women, particularly those in marginalized roles like 'water wives.' Ensure that these reforms address issues such as property rights, access to resources, and protection against exploitation.
10. **Promote Sustainable Agricultural Practices:** Encourage and support sustainable agricultural practices that reduce water usage and improve resilience to climate change. Training and resources should be provided to farmers to adopt practices that minimize water demand and enhance productivity.
11. **Raise Awareness and Advocacy:** Conduct awareness campaigns to highlight the challenges faced by 'water wives' and advocate for policy changes. Engage with policymakers, non-governmental organizations, and the public to generate support for addressing water scarcity and gender inequality.
12. **Foster International Collaboration:** Collaborate with international organizations and experts to share knowledge and resources for addressing water scarcity and gender inequality. Leverage global expertise and funding to implement effective solutions and strategies.

7. Conclusion

The 'water wives' phenomenon in Maharashtra stands as a glaring indictment of the dual injustices of climate change and entrenched gender inequality. This practice, where women are commodified and exploited to fetch water, lays bare the severe consequences of environmental neglect and societal inequities. As the specter of climate change tightens its grip, already marginalized communities are cornered into adopting draconian measures that not only compromise their dignity but also exacerbate existing social fissures.

The crux of the matter is clear: without immediate and decisive action, the vicious cycle of deprivation and gendered exploitation will deepen. The need for sustainable water management is not a mere policy preference; it is an urgent imperative. Implementing cutting-edge water conservation technologies and rectifying antiquated infrastructure must be prioritized to alleviate the acute water scarcity that fuels this crisis. Moreover, any intervention must be underpinned by robust gender-sensitive policies that dismantle the patriarchal structures perpetuating women's subjugation. These policies must not only offer legal safeguards but also actively promote economic and educational empowerment for women, liberating them from the shackles of exploitation.

Furthermore, an inclusive and participatory approach is non-negotiable. Local communities must be at the helm of devising and implementing strategies that address their unique challenges and circumstances. The battle against climate change and gender inequality cannot be waged in isolation; it requires a holistic approach that integrates environmental sustainability with social justice. Only by confronting these issues head-on and with unflinching resolve can we hope to dismantle the systems that perpetuate marginalization and poverty. The time for half-measures has passed; bold, comprehensive action is the only path forward. This is not merely a call to action but a clarion call for justice and equity, demanding a relentless pursuit of systemic change to secure a fair and resilient future for all.

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