

Why collecting water turns millions of women into second-class citizens

October 17 2018, by Gayathri D Naik



Credit: Zen Chung from Pexels

A family in India needs fresh water. But this family can't just turn on a tap. Instead, the women in the household must walk to fetch it, sometimes travelling miles carrying plastic or earthenware pots, possibly

with a child or two in tow, to the nearest safe source – regularly repeating the journey up to three times a day. In the scorching summer months of April and May, when temperatures regularly exceed 40C, it is a particularly gruelling daily ritual – and when they get home they must complete their other household chores: cooking, washing, bringing up the children, even helping on the family farm.

These women are reminiscent of the [many-armed Hindu goddess, Durga](#) – they have so many daily tasks, they could doubtless do with an extra set of hands. But they aren't the exception. This is the reality for millions of women in India. From the Western Ghats and the mountainous north-east to the arid desert state of Rajasthan, women across the country act as water collectors. And this gender specific role has a severe impact on every aspect of their lives, from their health and social life to education and their ability to have a real say in the community.

It is estimated that 163m Indians still don't have access to clean, [running water](#). Until that's fixed, this significant national problem will prevail, with women paying the biggest price.

A woman's burden

Water collection in India is a woman's job, irrespective of her physique – and there's no respite, even when she's menstruating, ill, or has something else to do. As groundwater resources are placed under increasing pressure due to over-reliance and unsustainable consumption, wells, ponds and tanks can also regularly dry up, escalating the water crisis and placing a greater burden on women to travel long distances. Access to unsafe drinking water also results in the spread of water-borne diseases. And women are often the first victims of both [water scarcity](#) and water pollution.

In urban areas, long queues of women with colourful plastic water pots

are eye-catching. But such images also highlight problems of water scarcity and the long waits they endure for the water tankers that deliver it in cities.

Urban woman, especially on the outskirts of cities and in slum areas, face the particular [burden of this water scarcity](#). In some areas, water is occasionally supplied in the middle of the night, meaning that these women are deprived of sleep and their productivity is affected. Indeed, there are women in the [global south who are denied education](#) purely because they have to collect water rather than go to school. In fact, one report revealed that almost [23% of girls in India drop out of school](#) on reaching puberty due to a lack of water and sanitation facilities.

When girls have to drop out of school to help their mothers collect water and perform other household tasks, they are denied their right to education – which is now a fundamental right under Article 21A of [the Indian Constitution](#). The saying goes: "Educate a woman, and she shall educate her family" – well, not these women. And because they're missing out on the opportunities education provides, so are their other family members.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Collecting water is an irksome journey, especially in dry areas during heat waves. But it can be a dangerous one, too. Women may risk physical attack, for example, or abuse. The situation is made worse by the lack of [adequate sanitation facilities](#) both at home and en route to the water source. And things are even worse for women from the lower strata of society who are even [denied access to water sources like public wells](#). This caste discrimination persists even though the Indian Constitution – which ensures equal access to public wells without any discrimination based on religion, race, caste, and sex – is 70 years old.

What the law says

India is a federal democratic country divided into the centre (or union

government), 29 states, and seven union territories. The power to make laws is divided between the union government and the states as per Schedule 7 of the Constitution of India, 1950. Accordingly, state governments can legislate on issues related to water, except for those matters involving inter-state rivers and water disputes.

However, the central government has also [initiated several programmes](#) and policies to ensure universal access to water in rural and urban areas, such as the National Rural Drinking Water Programme. Access to water is, after all, a fundamental right, covered by the "right to life" that is guaranteed by the Constitution. Indeed, Indian law far predates the international human rights regime on this. The broader human right to water was only recognised in 2002 under [General Comment 15](#) of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR).

The three obligations on states regarding the human right to water – "respect, protect and fulfill" – have been recognised by the Indian courts in several cases (such as [Subhash Kumar v State of Bihar, 1991](#) and [Vishala Kochi Kudivella Samprakshana Samiti v State of Kerala, 2006](#)). However, there is no legislation in India that explicitly recognises and implements this fundamental right to water. Instead, every five years, each new government brings with it its own pet programmes for water supply – and none of them have genuinely addressed the issue of water collection for women nor suggested any practical way to ease their burden.

How to tackle the crisis

[Several parts of India](#) face severe water scarcity and drought during the summer months. The reason for this water scarcity lies at the grass-roots level – unsustainable water consumption and unscientific ways of managing water supply. Traditional water sources and groundwater recharging points, such as tanks, ponds, canals and lakes, are either

neglected, polluted or used or filled in for other purposes.

Only with the constructive involvement of all of society's stakeholders can this problem be solved. And it must be solved soon. With the increasing threat of climate change, [water](#) scarcity could soon be an irreparable issue – and not just for [women](#), but for everyone in society.

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