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**EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

# Where Water Flows, Equality Grows — The Gender-Water Nexus India Cannot Ignore

 **THE HINDU**

22 March 2026

**SUBJECTS COVERED****SOCIAL ISSUES****ENVIRONMENT****GS PAPERS****GS1****GS2****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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The Hindu

22 March 2026

GS1

GS2

**TH** The Hindu

MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 1

GS Paper 2



## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"Women and girls spend 200 million hours daily fetching water globally — how can India's water policy explicitly address this gendered burden?"*

## WHY IN NEWS

World Water Day 2026 (March 22) carries the theme “Water and Gender” — prompting an examination of how water scarcity disproportionately burdens women and girls, and why India’s water policy must explicitly incorporate gender-sensitive design.

## The Invisible Labour of Water

The global data is stark:

INDICATOR	GLOBAL DATA
Time spent by women/girls fetching water	<b>200 million hours daily</b>
School days lost (girls, sub-Saharan Africa)	Up to <b>40%</b> due to water duties
Maternal deaths linked to contaminated water	<b>60%</b> in developing nations
Value of women’s unpaid water labour	<b>\$24 billion/year</b>

In India, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) data shows that in **~50% of rural households**, women or girls are the primary water collectors. In water-scarce districts of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Jharkhand, women walk **3-5 km daily** to fetch water.

## How Water Scarcity Hurts Women Specifically

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### 1. Education

When water sources dry up or become distant, girls are the first to be pulled from school to help with water collection. UNICEF data shows that **reducing water collection time by 15 minutes increases girls' school attendance by 12%**.

### 2. Health

- **Urinary tract infections:** Women in water-scarce areas restrict water intake and toilet use, leading to chronic UTIs
- **Musculoskeletal disorders:** Carrying 15-20 litres of water over long distances causes spinal and joint damage
- **Menstrual hygiene:** Water scarcity directly undermines menstrual hygiene management, keeping girls out of school during periods

### 3. Economic Participation

The ILO estimates that water collection duties reduce women's **available time for paid work by 25%** in rural South Asia. When JJM provides household tap connections, women gain time for self-employment, SHG activities, and agriculture — creating a direct economic multiplier.

### 4. Safety

Women fetching water from distant or isolated sources face **heightened risk of gender-based violence**. This is particularly acute during droughts or seasonal water scarcity when women must travel further.

## India's Policy Gaps

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Despite JJM's success in expanding tap connections, India's water policy remains **gender-blind** in several ways:

- 1 **VWSC composition:** Village Water and Sanitation Committees should mandate 50% women representation (currently, many have token representation)
- 2 **Infrastructure design:** Handpump and tap stand placement should consider women's safety and accessibility — not just engineering convenience
- 3 **Water quality monitoring:** Women-led water quality testing can improve both coverage and community engagement
- 4 **Budget tagging:** Water scheme budgets should include gender-responsive budgeting — tracking how much reaches women directly

## The Way Forward

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The editorial argues that India should use World Water Day 2026 as a catalyst for:

- ① **Gender-responsive JJM 2.0:** Mandate 50% women in VWSCs; measure JJM success partly by reduction in women’s water collection time
- ② **SHG-water convergence:** Link women’s Self-Help Groups with water quality monitoring and pipe maintenance — creating paid employment
- ③ **Sex-disaggregated data:** All water access surveys must collect and report gender-disaggregated data
- ④ **Menstrual hygiene integration:** Every JJM-connected school and anganwadi must have functional water supply for sanitation facilities
- ⑤ **Women water warriors:** Scale up models like Jal Saheli (Bundelkhand) where women lead community water management

### UPSC RELEVANCE

World Water Day 2026 theme, NFHS-5 data, JJM, VWSC, Jal Saheli.

#### MAINS GS-1:

Women and water — social dimension of resource scarcity.

#### MAINS GS-2:

Government policy for women’s welfare, JJM gender integration, SHG-water convergence.

#### GS-4:

Ethics of development — when infrastructure ignores half the population.

## ★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

### WORLD WATER DAY 2026:

Theme: “Water and Gender”

Slogan: “Where water flows, equality grows”

Date: March 22 (since 1993)

### GENDER-WATER DATA:

Women/girls spend 200 million hours daily fetching water globally

50% of Indian rural households: women are primary water collectors (NFHS-5)

Reducing collection time by 15 minutes: 12% increase in girls’ school attendance

Women’s water labour value: \$24 billion/year globally

### JJM AND GENDER:

VWSC (Village Water and Sanitation Committee): Local governance body for water

Target: FHTC to all rural households by 2028

Current tap coverage: ~81% (158 million rural households)

Jal Saheli model: Women-led water management in Bundelkhand

### OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

SDG 5: Gender Equality; SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

NFHS-5: National Family Health Survey (2019-21)

India SHGs: ~12 million SHGs with ~14 crore women members

NRLM (DAY-NRLM): National Rural Livelihoods Mission — SHG promotion

Swachh Bharat Mission: Sanitation access also has gendered impacts

Sources: [The Hindu](#) , [UN-Water](#) , [UNICEF](#)

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