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FUTURE CHALLENGES IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD**

**Domestic water security in Rajasthan, India: Insights on
gender, social inequity and water management practices**

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Introduction

Jal Jeevan Mission, national flagship programme of Government India envisions safe and adequate drinking water for all, at all times, in rural India by 2024 (UNICEF 2020). Jal Jeevan Mission emphasizes, on gender inclusive approaches at the local level to improve suitability, sustainability and reach of water and sanitation services. These approaches focus on and involve women in the design of facilities, as well as in the implementation and management of services, thus introducing gender 'transformative' governance required under water sector guidelines. The flagship program also prioritizes the need to address the last mile connectivity to ensure equity-based distribution of water supplied to the most vulnerable communities in fringe areas of a village. An important area of focus in JJM is also to ensure adoption of best water management practices through implementation of field interventions of water security in action planning across the state and revival and strengthening of traditional water sources for water security.

Rajasthan is one of the driest states in India characterized by scanty and erratic rainfall and limited surface water (1.16 per cent of national resources) and ground water availability (1.72 per cent of national resources) (Dept. of Water Resources, GoR, 2019). Heavy reliance on 'imported' water from neighbouring states adds to the uncertainty. Barmer and Jaisalmer districts in western Rajasthan are characterized by low to very low rainfall and excessive aridity due to very high temperatures. Thus safe water availability for domestic and production purposes is impacted round the year. In these two districts, apart from scarce water availability there are major water quality issues as well. In Barmer only 5 per cent and in Jaisalmer merely 2.8 per cent households have individual tap connections as against a state average of 12.38 per cent. (JJM 2019). Studies in western Rajasthan suggest that women spend 4-6 hours daily in fetching water for household consumption (Sharma 2017). The opportunity costs of collecting water for women are high, with far reaching effects. Women are removed from being able to make an income (Shiva 2017).

The paper aims to bring insights on an equity focused, gender responsive domestic water security strategy through field study carried out by UNICEF in 2019-2020 in two water stressed Districts of Barmer and Jaisalmer in desert dominated state of Rajasthan in India. The findings of the study have been useful in understanding the inequities, gender issues and acknowledging the local water management practices and contribute in addressing key challenges of the roll-out of the ambitious Jal Jeevan Mission in hard to reach and water stressed areas of India.

Methodology

An extensive literature review was carried out for the study along with field studies in two blocks each in the districts of Jaisalmer and Barmer, including consultations with various stakeholders. A total of 17 villages were included in the field study in the blocks of Sam, Jaisalmer, Chohtan and Sindhari. The field study included focus group discussions (FGDs) with men, women, boys and girls groups, transect walks in the villages, interactions with Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) members representing local governance and other

community leaders. Blocks were selected through purposive stratified sampling and within blocks, the villages or habitations were selected by random stratified sampling. Consultation with groups in each village was based on their socioeconomic profile, location of habitation and perceived marginalization in terms of access to water. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) including key Government officials provided good insights into systemic challenges and opportunities to achieve domestic water security in a water stressed areas in an equitable manner.

Findings

The study reveals that investment in household water storage structures ('tanka') has been a game changer for domestic water security in remote villages where piped water supply is either techno-economically not feasible or regular water supply is not reliable. Communities in remote parts of these districts have been practicing conjunctive use of water as matter of regular practice, which needs to be promoted.

The study also reveals that women, over generations, have accumulated and put into practice indigenous knowledge on wise and efficient use of water as a scarce and precious resource. Yet when it comes to crucial decision making at house hold or at community level their voice is negligible and appears to be a missed opportunity. These aspects are gradually through encouragement of women participation.

The study reveals that with the advent of the household *tanka*, the inequity in access to water is reduced to a large extent. However, while tanker water vending has become a thriving business for relatively well-off and influential people, marginalized families face double deprivation due to irregular water supply and having to pay the high cost of tanker water, which is fetched from common resources within or outside villages. The view that the poor pay more in order to meet their basic water needs was validated.

Based on the insights of study carried out in Rajasthan, India, it can be concluded that active participation of women in decision making of water both at habitation and household level, brining equity focused approaches through promoting localised solution and strengthening conjunctive use of water contributes in enhancing domestic water security in water stressed areas as well as in demonstrating localized climate resilient approaches.

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