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## THE ROLE OF WATER, SANITATION, AND HYGIENE (WASH) IN THE LIVELIHOOD SUSTAINABILITY OF WIDOW FISHERY WOMEN IN COASTAL COMMUNITIES

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### Abstract

*Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) play a crucial role in ensuring the well-being and economic sustainability of communities, particularly in coastal fishing regions. Widowed fisherwomen, who already face socio-economic challenges, are further burdened by inadequate WASH facilities, which adversely affect their health, productivity, and financial stability. This qualitative study examines the intersection of WASH and livelihood sustainability for widowed fisherwomen in coastal communities, with a specific focus on Nagapattinam District, Tamil Nadu. By reviewing secondary sources, including government reports, NGO publications, and peer-reviewed studies, this report highlights the pressing need for improved WASH infrastructure and policy interventions to enhance the resilience of this vulnerable group.*

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

Coastal fisheries contribute significantly to the economy and food security of many nations, particularly in developing countries like India. Women play an essential role in post-harvest activities, including fish processing, drying, and vending. However, widowed fisherwomen in these communities experience severe socio-economic marginalization. Their struggles are further intensified by poor access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene, which directly impacts their ability to sustain their livelihoods.

#### 1.2 Significance of WASH in Livelihood Sustainability

WASH facilities are critical for maintaining health, productivity, and

economic resilience. Poor sanitation and lack of clean water lead to frequent illnesses, reduced work efficiency, and limited participation in economic activities. Widowed fisherwomen, who often lack financial security and social support, are disproportionately affected by inadequate WASH services.

### 2. Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the impact of inadequate WASH facilities on the livelihood sustainability of widowed fisherwomen in coastal communities.
2. To explore socio-economic challenges exacerbated by poor WASH infrastructure.
3. To recommend policy interventions for improving WASH conditions

and enhancing livelihood sustainability.

### **3. Review of Literature**

#### **3.1 Livelihood Challenges of Women in Fisheries**

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2021), women in fisheries face significant barriers, including gender discrimination, financial insecurity, and lack of access to resources. Widowed fisherwomen are particularly vulnerable, as they often depend solely on fisheries-related activities for survival but lack the necessary infrastructure to sustain their work.

#### **3.2 WASH and Its Importance in Livelihood Sustainability**

Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) are fundamental components of public health and play a crucial role in ensuring sustainable livelihoods. The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF (2020) emphasize the importance of adequate WASH facilities in maintaining health and productivity. The lack of access to clean water, proper sanitation, and hygiene infrastructure can significantly impact the ability of individuals, especially women, to sustain their livelihoods effectively.

One of the primary ways poor WASH conditions affect livelihoods is through the prevalence of waterborne diseases. Contaminated water sources and inadequate sanitation contribute to illnesses such as diarrhea, cholera, and dysentery, which disproportionately affect vulnerable populations. Frequent illness reduces productivity by increasing absenteeism from work, limiting income opportunities, and imposing financial burdens on families due to medical expenses. When workers, particularly in labor-intensive sectors such as agriculture and fish processing, suffer from health issues, their ability to sustain a stable income is compromised.

Women, in particular, face significant challenges due to inadequate WASH infrastructure. Many women are engaged in informal sectors such as small-scale fish

vending and processing, where the availability of clean water and sanitation facilities is critical. Poor hygiene in these workspaces not only endangers their health but also affects the safety and quality of their products. Without proper sanitation facilities near fish vending and processing areas, the risk of contamination increases, leading to reduced consumer trust and economic losses. Furthermore, women often bear the responsibility of managing household water needs, which can be time-consuming and physically demanding when clean water sources are not readily available. This additional burden reduces the time they can dedicate to income-generating activities, thereby affecting their economic independence and overall family well-being.

Another crucial aspect of WASH in livelihood sustainability is its impact on education and long-term economic stability. In communities where schools lack proper sanitation facilities, children, particularly girls, are more likely to miss classes due to hygiene-related issues such as the absence of menstrual hygiene management facilities. Education is a key factor in breaking the cycle of poverty, and inadequate WASH infrastructure limits the ability of young individuals to acquire skills and knowledge necessary for future employment.

#### **3.3 The Gendered Impact of Poor WASH Infrastructure**

Research by Choudhury & Haque (2022) shows that women in coastal communities disproportionately suffer from inadequate sanitation facilities. Limited access to toilets and safe drinking water increases their vulnerability to health issues, social exclusion, and economic deprivation. Widowed fisherwomen, in particular, experience greater hardship due to limited mobility and lack of support networks.

#### **3.4 Case Studies on WASH and Women's Livelihood**

Studies in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have demonstrated the positive

impact of improved WASH infrastructure on women's workforce participation. According to Hossain (2019), investments in WASH facilities significantly enhance economic stability by enabling women to maintain hygiene standards, reducing health-related absences, and increasing productivity.

### **3.5 Impact of Climate Change on WASH and Livelihoods in Coastal Communities**

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2021) reports that climate change has led to water scarcity, rising sea levels, and increased salinity in drinking water sources. Das & Hossain (2022) further highlight that these changes negatively impact WASH infrastructure, exacerbating the struggles of coastal communities. Widowed fisherwomen are particularly affected as they depend on stable WASH conditions for their daily activities and economic survival.

### **3.6 Policy Interventions and WASH Improvements in Coastal Livelihoods**

Government programs, such as the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) and the National Fisheries Policy, aim to improve WASH conditions in fishing villages. Studies by Sharma & Patel (2020) indicate that access to proper sanitation and hygiene facilities increases women's participation in fisheries-related work. However, implementation challenges, such as inadequate funding, poor maintenance, and lack of gender-sensitive approaches, have hindered these efforts (Kumar et al., 2021).

## **4. Research Methodology**

This study is based entirely on secondary sources, including government reports, academic research papers, and publications from international organizations. A qualitative analysis of existing literature is used to examine the relationship between WASH conditions and livelihood sustainability among widowed fisherwomen.

## **5. Findings and Discussion**

Based on the literature review, the following key findings emerge:

### **Poor WASH Conditions Lead to Health-Related Work Absences**

One of the primary ways poor WASH conditions affect livelihoods is through the prevalence of waterborne diseases. Contaminated water sources and inadequate sanitation contribute to illnesses such as diarrhea, cholera, and dysentery, which disproportionately affect vulnerable populations. Frequent illness reduces productivity by increasing absenteeism from work, limiting income opportunities, and imposing financial burdens on families due to medical expenses. Widowed fisherwomen, who rely on daily fish vending and processing for sustenance, are particularly vulnerable, as poor health restricts their ability to work consistently. Without reliable participation in their livelihood activities, they face economic instability and greater dependence on external assistance.

### **Lack of Sanitation Facilities Limits Economic Opportunities**

Women, in particular, face significant challenges due to inadequate WASH infrastructure. Many women are engaged in informal sectors such as small-scale fish vending and processing, where the availability of clean water and sanitation facilities is critical. Poor hygiene in these workspaces not only endangers their health but also affects the safety and quality of their products. The absence of accessible and gender-sensitive sanitation facilities further limits women's ability to engage in fisheries work, forcing them to travel long distances in search of suitable restrooms or avoid work altogether. This not only reduces their income-generating potential but also reinforces gender disparities in economic participation. Moreover, the lack of proper sanitation facilities near fish vending and processing areas increases the risk of contamination, leading to reduced consumer trust and economic losses.

### **Climate Change Exacerbates WASH Challenges**

Another crucial aspect of WASH in livelihood sustainability is its intersection with climate change. Rising sea levels and saline intrusion negatively impact drinking water quality, further aggravating WASH-related issues for coastal communities. As freshwater sources become increasingly salinized, access to safe drinking water diminishes, forcing communities to rely on expensive or unsafe alternatives. This problem is particularly severe for fisherfolk who live in low-lying coastal areas and depend on marine resources for their livelihood. Additionally, extreme weather events such as storms and floods damage existing WASH infrastructure, leading to further health hazards and economic disruptions. Without urgent interventions, climate-induced WASH challenges will continue to threaten the sustainability of coastal livelihoods.

#### **Policy Interventions Have Had Limited Impact Due to Poor Implementation**

Improving WASH infrastructure has significant benefits for economic growth and social well-being. Access to clean water, improved sanitation, and hygiene education reduces the burden of disease, increases workforce productivity, and enhances the overall quality of life. However, despite national policies recognizing the need for improved WASH services, practical implementation remains hindered by funding constraints and lack of community participation. In many cases, allocated budgets for WASH projects are insufficient or mismanaged, leading to incomplete or poorly maintained facilities. Additionally, a top-down approach to policy implementation often overlooks the specific needs of affected communities, resulting in ineffective solutions. Governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private sector stakeholders must collaborate to invest in sustainable WASH solutions, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. This includes developing policies that prioritize water security, constructing sanitation facilities in high-risk work

environments, and conducting awareness programs to promote hygiene practices.

#### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Improving WASH facilities in coastal fishing communities is crucial for enhancing the livelihood sustainability of widowed fisherwomen. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Expansion of Safe Water and Sanitation Infrastructure:** Governments and NGOs should invest in providing clean water and sanitation facilities in fish markets, processing centres, and residential areas.
2. **Development of Gender-Sensitive WASH Policies:** Policies should focus on ensuring that WASH infrastructure meets the specific needs of widowed fisherwomen, including the provision of safe sanitation spaces.
3. **Integration of WASH with Livelihood Programs:** WASH improvements should be linked with economic empowerment programs to enhance the sustainability of fisheries-related activities.
4. **Community Participation in WASH Initiatives:** Encouraging local participation in decision-making processes will ensure that interventions are contextually relevant and sustainable.

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