

Gender-Transformative Water Governance in Assam: Repositioning Women as Leaders and Decision-Makers

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Abstract—Water governance in India has historically positioned women as passive beneficiaries of development interventions rather than as active planners, decision-makers, and institutional leaders. In Assam, where recurrent floods, riverbank erosion, water contamination, and climate-induced vulnerabilities disproportionately affect women, this governance gap becomes especially pronounced. Women bear the primary responsibility for household water collection, sanitation management, caregiving, and health protection, yet they remain significantly underrepresented in technical planning processes and institutional decision-making structures related to water resource management. Although national programmes such as the Jal Jeevan Mission encourage women's participation in local water governance institutions, meaningful engagement in planning, budgeting, implementation, monitoring, and policy formulation remains limited. Existing governance frameworks often prioritize numerical representation over substantive participation, resulting in symbolic inclusion rather than transformative leadership. This paper examines the transition from token participation to transformative gender mainstreaming in water governance in Assam. It critically analyses the institutional, socio-cultural, technical, and policy-related barriers that restrict women's effective leadership in water projects, particularly in flood-prone districts such as Majuli, Dhemaji, BARPETA, and Morigaon, where recurring climate shocks intensify water insecurity and gender inequality. The study argues that sustainable, climate-resilient, and socially inclusive water governance cannot be achieved by treating women merely as recipients of services. Instead, women must be repositioned as planners, technical contributors, community mobilizers, policy influencers, and institutional leaders capable of shaping water governance systems at local and regional levels. By reframing women's roles within governance structures such as Village Water and Sanitation Committees (VWSCs), local self-government institutions, and community-based water management systems, the paper advocates for a shift from welfare-oriented participation toward rights-based and

leadership-oriented engagement. It further emphasizes that gender-responsive water governance requires institutional reforms, targeted capacity building, technical training, financial inclusion, and the integration of women's experiential knowledge into climate adaptation and water security planning. Through this approach, the paper contributes to broader debates on gender justice, participatory governance, and climate resilience in rural development policy and practice in Assam.

I. INTRODUCTION

Water governance extends beyond environmental management and engineering infrastructure; it is closely linked to social equity, public health, gender relations, and livelihood security. In Assam, women play a central role in household water collection, sanitation management, caregiving, and post-disaster recovery. Despite this everyday engagement with water systems, women remain largely marginalized from formal decision-making structures associated with water governance and infrastructure planning.

Historically, development interventions framed women primarily as “beneficiaries” of water supply systems rather than as active participants in governance processes. This approach assumes that women are passive recipients whose needs can be addressed through service delivery alone. However, participatory development research demonstrates that infrastructure-led interventions often fail when women's practical needs, safety concerns, and local knowledge are excluded from project design and implementation.

Contemporary gender mainstreaming discourse therefore emphasizes not only representation, but also meaningful participation, leadership, and institutional authority. In Assam, a state characterized by recurring floods, riverbank erosion, and climate vulnerability,

this transition is critical for building sustainable and inclusive water governance systems.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

This paper aims to:

1. Examine the limitations of beneficiary-oriented approaches in water governance in Assam.
2. Analyse structural barriers restricting women's participation in decision-making processes; and
3. Propose a gender-transformative framework for inclusive and climate-resilient water governance.

1.2 Methodology

The study is based on qualitative policy analysis and secondary literature review. It draws upon government reports, Jal Jeevan Mission guidelines, gender and governance literature, climate resilience frameworks, and institutional studies related to water governance in India and Assam.

1.3 Research Gap

Existing literature on gender and water governance in India has examined women's participation in community-based water management systems, limited attention has been given to the transition from symbolic participation toward substantive institutional leadership in climate-vulnerable regions such as Assam. Furthermore, the intersection between flood vulnerability, localized ecological knowledge, and women's governance roles remains underexplored within current policy and academic discourse. This paper seeks to address this gap by analysing how gender-transformative governance approaches can strengthen climate-resilient water systems in Assam.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN WATER GOVERNANCE

Gender mainstreaming refers to the systematic integration of gender perspectives into policy formulation, planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. It recognizes that women and men experience water access, sanitation, climate risks, and environmental governance differently because of unequal social roles and power relations.

Traditional water governance frameworks largely focused on infrastructure provision and technical engineering solutions, viewing women mainly as domestic water users and caregivers. Their involvement rarely extended to planning, budgeting,

technical management, or policy formulation. Contemporary approaches, however, recognize women as policy contributors, institutional leaders, financial decision-makers, and climate resilience planners.

Meaningful gender mainstreaming therefore requires moving beyond numerical participation toward structural inclusion within governance systems and decision-making institutions.

The paper draws upon Feminist Political Ecology (FPE), which examines how environmental governance systems are shaped by gendered power relations, unequal access to resources, and socio-political structures. FPE highlights that women's experiences with water insecurity are not merely technical or environmental issues, but are deeply connected to institutional inequalities, labour divisions, and political exclusion.

III. LOCALIZED EXPERIENCES FROM FLOOD-PRONE DISTRICTS OF ASSAM

The limitations of gender-responsive water governance become particularly visible in flood-prone districts such as Majuli, Dhemaji, Barpeta, and Morigaon. Communities living in the Brahmaputra floodplains and char areas experience recurring disruptions to drinking water systems, sanitation infrastructure, and public health services due to annual floods and erosion. Women bear a disproportionate burden of managing household water access, sanitation, caregiving, and post-disaster recovery.

In Majuli, women frequently face severe drinking water insecurity during monsoon seasons. Research on gendered disaster vulnerability highlights challenges such as mobility restrictions, sanitation insecurity, increased unpaid labour, and exclusion from formal disaster planning. Yet women possess valuable indigenous knowledge regarding flood adaptation, seasonal water management, elevated housing systems, and coping strategies that remain largely overlooked within formal planning frameworks.

At the same time, localized initiatives demonstrate the transformative potential of women's participation. Under the Jal Jeevan Mission, UNICEF-supported "Jaldoot" initiatives mobilized adolescent girls and community volunteers to promote water quality awareness and safe sanitation practices. In Majuli alone, more than 700 Jaldoots contributed to

awareness campaigns and community monitoring of piped water supply systems.

Similarly, in Morigaon, women and adolescent volunteers participated in Field Testing Kit (FTK) demonstrations, household water safety campaigns, and grassroots monitoring exercises. More than 1,500 trained Jaldots reportedly supported awareness generation and local water governance activities. These examples demonstrate that women and girls can function not only as beneficiaries, but also as active contributors to governance systems.

The experiences of char and floodplain communities in Barpeta and Dhemaji further highlight the importance of integrating women's localized knowledge into climate-resilient infrastructure planning. Women often possess detailed understanding of seasonal flood patterns, contamination risks, embankment vulnerabilities, and safe access routes during disasters. However, these insights are rarely incorporated into formal planning processes.

Women-led community organizations and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have also strengthened resilience across Assam. In Majuli, SHGs supported through the Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission participated in sanitation campaigns, Food-Nutrition-Health-WASH initiatives, and gender mainstreaming activities. During the 2024 floods, women-managed relief camps further demonstrated women's leadership capacities in relief distribution, sanitation management, and community coordination.

These localized experiences illustrate that women's participation becomes most effective when it moves beyond symbolic representation toward substantive engagement in planning, monitoring, technical management, disaster response, and institutional leadership.

IV. WATER GOVERNANCE CONTEXT IN ASSAM

Assam possesses extensive river systems, including the Brahmaputra and Barak basins, yet remains highly vulnerable to annual floods, riverbank erosion, water contamination, and inadequate sanitation infrastructure. Seasonal disruptions disproportionately affect rural and riverine communities.

Women are especially vulnerable because they are primarily responsible for household water collection,

sanitation management, caregiving, and maintaining family health during disasters. Floods increase women's unpaid labour burden, reduce access to clean water, and heighten risks related to health, displacement, and sanitation insecurity.

Despite these realities, water governance institutions in Assam remain largely male-dominated, particularly in technical planning and infrastructure management. Women's knowledge regarding local water systems, seasonal variations, and coping mechanisms is often overlooked during project conceptualization and implementation.

V. EXISTING POLICY LANDSCAPE

Several national and state-level initiatives have sought to promote women's participation in water governance, including the Jal Jeevan Mission, Swachh Bharat Mission, Panchayati Raj Institutions, and Village Water and Sanitation Committees (VWSCs). These programs encourage community-based management and mandate women's representation within local governance structures.

Under the Jal Jeevan Mission, women are expected to participate in planning, implementation, operation, and maintenance of village water supply systems. However, representation alone has not translated into meaningful governance participation. Women are frequently included in committees but excluded from actual decision-making processes.

Meetings often remain dominated by male stakeholders, while technical and financial control stays concentrated among engineers, contractors, and local elites. Consequently, women's concerns regarding accessibility, sanitation, safety, and climate vulnerability are rarely integrated into infrastructure planning. This reflects the gap between procedural participation and substantive empowerment.

VI. LIMITATIONS OF THE BENEFICIARY APPROACH

The traditional beneficiary-oriented model treats women primarily as end-users of water infrastructure rather than as contributors to governance systems. Their roles are confined to domestic water management and caregiving, while decisions regarding infrastructure design, resource allocation,

and institutional management remain controlled by male stakeholders and technical authorities.

A major limitation of this approach is token representation. Women may formally occupy positions within VWSCs or local governance institutions, but their participation often remains symbolic. Leadership roles and decision-making authority continue to be dominated by male members, reducing women's inclusion to procedural compliance rather than transformative participation.

Another limitation is the exclusion of women from project design and planning processes. Women are rarely consulted during feasibility assessments, site selection, or infrastructure planning, despite being the primary users of household water systems. As a result, infrastructure frequently fails to address women's practical needs, safety concerns, and climate vulnerabilities. In flood-prone regions of Assam, such exclusion reduces both the accessibility and sustainability of water systems.

VII. CLIMATE VULNERABILITY, GENDERED WATER INSECURITY, AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES IN ASSAM

The relationship between climate change, water governance, and gender inequality becomes particularly visible in flood-prone regions of Assam, where recurring floods, erosion, and ecological instability continuously reshape patterns of vulnerability. Climate-induced disruptions affect not only physical infrastructure but also social relations, public health systems, livelihood security, and institutional governance capacities. Women experience these impacts disproportionately because of their socially assigned responsibilities related to water collection, sanitation management, caregiving, food security, and household health protection. Consequently, climate vulnerability in Assam is not gender neutral; rather, it intersects with existing socio-economic inequalities and governance exclusions.

7.1. Flood-Induced Displacement and Gendered Vulnerability

Annual flooding and riverbank erosion along the Brahmaputra and Barak River systems have produced repeated cycles of displacement across districts such as Majuli, Dhemaji, BARPETA, Morigaon, and several char areas. Families frequently lose homes, agricultural land, sanitation facilities, and drinking

water sources during monsoon disasters. Displacement often forces communities into temporary relief camps or informal settlements where access to clean water, sanitation, healthcare, and privacy becomes severely constrained.

Women and girls face heightened vulnerability within these conditions. The breakdown of household infrastructure increases unpaid labour burdens as women must secure drinking water, care for children and elderly family members, manage food preparation, and maintain hygiene under crisis conditions. Relief camps frequently lack gender-sensitive sanitation facilities, privacy, lighting, and menstrual hygiene support systems, exposing women to health risks, insecurity, and psychosocial stress. Pregnant women, adolescent girls, elderly women, and persons with disabilities experience compounded vulnerabilities during displacement periods.

Despite these realities, disaster management and water governance institutions often prioritize immediate infrastructure restoration while overlooking the gendered dimensions of displacement. Women's experiences within relief environments therefore remain inadequately integrated into climate adaptation planning and post-disaster governance frameworks.

7.2. Contamination of Tube Wells and Drinking Water Sources

Floodwaters in Assam regularly submerge hand pumps, shallow tube wells, ponds, and piped water systems, leading to widespread contamination of drinking water sources. Sedimentation, sewage mixing, bacterial contamination, and arsenic or iron-related water quality concerns become more severe during prolonged flood periods. In many rural and riverine communities, households are forced to depend on unsafe surface water sources when formal infrastructure systems fail.

Women bear primary responsibility for managing household water safety under these conditions. They must travel longer distances to collect potable water, monitor water storage practices, and manage water purification using limited household resources. This substantially increases physical labour burdens and exposure to waterborne diseases such as diarrhoea, cholera, dysentery, and skin infections.

However, women's practical knowledge regarding safe water sources, seasonal contamination patterns, and community coping mechanisms remains

underutilized within formal water governance systems. Climate-resilient governance frameworks must therefore recognize women not only as users of water systems but also as local knowledge holders capable of contributing to water quality monitoring, source protection, and decentralized adaptation planning.

7.3. Sanitation Collapse During Floods

Flood events frequently result in the collapse or submergence of toilets, drainage systems, septic tanks, and solid-liquid waste management infrastructure across rural Assam. Open defecation often re-emerges temporarily in flood-affected regions due to damaged sanitation systems and displacement pressures. Such conditions disproportionately affect women because sanitation insecurity directly intersects with dignity, health, safety, and bodily privacy.

Women and adolescent girls frequently delay toilet use, reduce food and water intake, or travel unsafe distances in search of private sanitation spaces during floods. These coping strategies increase risks related to urinary tract infections, dehydration, reproductive health complications, and gender-based insecurity. In relief camps and temporary settlements, inadequate sanitation infrastructure further intensifies women's vulnerability.

The collapse of sanitation systems demonstrates that climate resilience cannot be understood solely through engineering solutions. Water governance must integrate gender-sensitive sanitation planning, elevated flood-resilient toilets, decentralized waste management systems, and emergency WASH preparedness strategies into broader climate adaptation frameworks.

7.4. Menstrual Hygiene Challenges and Public Health Risks

Climate-induced disasters significantly disrupt menstrual hygiene management in rural and flood-prone communities. During floods and displacement periods, access to sanitary products, clean water, washing facilities, and private spaces becomes severely restricted. Adolescent girls and women often experience heightened discomfort, stigma, and health risks due to inadequate menstrual hygiene infrastructure within relief camps and temporary shelters.

Menstrual hygiene challenges are rarely treated as a governance issue within conventional disaster management systems. Instead, they are often viewed as private or secondary concerns despite their direct implications for health, dignity, education, mobility, and psychosocial wellbeing. The absence of menstrual hygiene planning within water governance frameworks reflects broader gender-blind approaches to climate adaptation and public health planning.

Integrating menstrual hygiene management into climate-resilient WASH governance therefore represents an essential component of gender-transformative water governance. This requires the inclusion of women in disaster preparedness committees, relief planning systems, sanitation design, and public health monitoring mechanisms.

7.5. Erosion-Related Migration and Livelihood Insecurity

Riverbank erosion has emerged as one of the most severe ecological challenges in Assam, particularly across char areas and Brahmaputra floodplains. Erosion-induced displacement frequently destroys agricultural land, housing, livelihoods, and community infrastructure, compelling families to migrate repeatedly in search of safer settlements and economic opportunities.

Such migration patterns generate profound gendered consequences. Women often experience reduced access to education, healthcare, livelihood opportunities, and social protection systems following displacement. Migration also weakens women's participation within local governance institutions because displaced populations frequently remain excluded from formal planning systems and administrative processes.

In many cases, male outmigration for wage labour increases women's responsibilities within households and communities, effectively feminizing climate vulnerability while simultaneously expanding women's informal governance roles. Yet institutional recognition of women's adaptation labour remains limited within formal climate governance structures.

Addressing erosion-related migration therefore requires governance approaches that integrate livelihood resilience, land security, social protection, gender-responsive rehabilitation policies, and inclusive planning mechanisms for displaced populations.

7.6. Climate Adaptation Planning and Women's Leadership

Climate adaptation planning in Assam has historically focused on embankment construction, flood control engineering, infrastructure restoration, and disaster response mechanisms. While these interventions remain important, technocratic approaches alone cannot address the social and gendered dimensions of climate vulnerability.

Women possess extensive experiential knowledge regarding seasonal water fluctuations, safe water storage, local ecological changes, food security management, flood coping strategies, and community-based adaptation practices. Their everyday engagement with environmental systems provides critical insights into localized resilience planning. However, governance institutions often fail to incorporate these perspectives into formal adaptation frameworks.

Gender-transformative climate governance therefore requires repositioning women as active planners, technical contributors, and institutional leaders within climate adaptation systems. Women's participation in Village Water and Sanitation Committees (VWSCs), Panchayati Raj Institutions, disaster management committees, and community monitoring systems should extend beyond symbolic representation toward substantive decision-making authority.

Institutionalizing women's leadership within climate adaptation planning can improve accountability, strengthen participatory governance, enhance infrastructure sustainability, and promote socially inclusive resilience strategies. In flood-prone and erosion-affected regions such as Assam, climate resilience cannot be separated from gender justice and democratic environmental governance.

VIII. REFRAMING WOMEN AS PLANNERS, DECISION-MAKERS, AND LEADERS

Reframing women's roles within water governance requires institutional transformation rather than symbolic inclusion. Women must be recognized as active contributors whose knowledge and leadership are essential for sustainable and climate-resilient water systems.

Women possess extensive localized knowledge regarding seasonal water availability, sanitation practices, flood disruptions, and household water

management. Integrating this knowledge into baseline assessments, site selection, and infrastructure planning can significantly improve the effectiveness and sustainability of water systems.

Meaningful participation also requires decision-making authority. Women should hold voting rights, executive positions, budget oversight responsibilities, and monitoring roles within VWSCs and Panchayati Raj Institutions. Institutional reforms must therefore create enabling environments where women can influence policy priorities and resource allocation.

Women should also be recognized as technical contributors. Traditionally, water governance has been treated as a male-dominated technical domain. However, women can effectively contribute to water quality testing, infrastructure monitoring, sanitation management, disaster preparedness, and community-based data collection. Capacity-building initiatives should therefore focus on technical training, climate adaptation, digital monitoring, and infrastructure management.

8.1 Women as Climate Resilience Leaders

In a climate-vulnerable state such as Assam, women's leadership is critical for disaster preparedness, ecosystem restoration, water conservation, and flood-resilient infrastructure planning. Women-led adaptation strategies can strengthen community resilience and environmental sustainability while improving governance accountability.

IX. STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Despite progressive policy frameworks, several structural barriers continue to restrict women's meaningful participation in water governance systems in Assam.

9.1. Patriarchal Social Norms

Deeply rooted patriarchal norms restrict women's mobility, visibility, and leadership opportunities. Social expectations often discourage women from speaking openly in public forums or participating in technical discussions, limiting their influence within governance institutions.

9.2. Limited Technical Exposure

Water governance is frequently perceived as a technical sector dominated by male professionals. Women often receive fewer opportunities for technical

education, leadership training, and institutional mentoring, reducing their confidence and participation in governance systems.

9.3. Time Poverty and Unpaid Labour

Women remain primarily responsible for unpaid domestic work, including caregiving, sanitation management, and post-disaster recovery. During floods, these responsibilities intensify, leaving women with limited time to engage in governance activities and institutional processes.

9.4. Institutional Bias

Governance structures often remain hierarchical, and male dominated. Women may be excluded from informal decision-making networks, while institutional cultures frequently overlook literacy barriers, mobility constraints, and caregiving responsibilities.

9.5. Weak Gender-Responsive Monitoring Systems

Existing monitoring systems largely focus on infrastructure outputs such as tap connections or completed schemes, while neglecting indicators related to women's leadership, decision-making influence, or reduction in unpaid labour burdens. Consequently, women's substantive contributions remain invisible within evaluation frameworks.

X. TOWARDS GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE WATER GOVERNANCE IN ASSAM

Achieving meaningful gender mainstreaming requires moving beyond token representation toward transformative governance approaches that address structural inequalities and unequal power relations.

First, gender considerations must be integrated from the project design stage itself. Gender-sensitive needs assessments, participatory planning exercises, and safety audits should ensure that infrastructure systems respond to women's practical realities and climate vulnerabilities.

Second, women's leadership capacity must be strengthened through technical training, financial literacy programs, climate resilience workshops, and institutional mentoring. Building women's managerial and technical skills can enhance accountability and improve governance outcomes.

Third, institutional reforms are essential. Women should occupy executive and decision-making positions supported by gender-responsive budgeting, transparent accountability systems, and institutional safeguards. Governance structures must ensure that women possess real authority in planning, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring processes.

Fourth, women-led monitoring and accountability systems can improve transparency and service delivery. Community-based monitoring initiatives led by women can strengthen oversight of water infrastructure, sanitation systems, and disaster preparedness mechanisms.

Finally, success indicators within water governance programs must move beyond numerical representation. Monitoring frameworks should evaluate women's influence in decision-making, reduction in unpaid labour, accessibility improvements, and climate resilience outcomes. Measuring substantive participation is essential for understanding whether governance systems are genuinely gender transformative.

XI. CONCLUSION

Sustainable water governance in Assam cannot be achieved through infrastructure investments alone. It requires redistributing institutional power, recognizing women's knowledge systems, and embedding gender-transformative approaches into governance structures. Women's leadership is not supplementary to water governance; it is central to climate resilience, democratic participation, and sustainable development. Representation alone cannot ensure gender mainstreaming unless women participate meaningfully in planning, implementation, governance, and monitoring processes.

In a climate-vulnerable state such as Assam, the transition from viewing women as beneficiaries to recognizing them as planners, decision-makers, technical contributors, and institutional leaders represents a critical paradigm shift in development planning and environmental governance.

Gender-transformative water governance is therefore not merely a question of social inclusion; it represents a structural reconfiguration of environmental decision-making systems. In climate-vulnerable regions such as Assam, democratizing water governance through

women's leadership is essential for building resilient, equitable, and sustainable rural futures.

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