



Empowering Women & Nurturing Children

Hygiene education in Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) supports healthy habits from a young age. Provision of nearby water sources frees up time for education, skill development, and income generation.

Access to clean water, adequate sanitation, and better hygiene practices, collectively known as WASH, are fundamental human rights. It is a foundational element in achieving gender equality and fostering child development across the world.

In many parts of the world, including India, the burden of sanitation management falls disproportionately on women and girls. This unpaid labour often takes up several hours each day, limiting their ability to attend school, participate in economic activities, or engage with the community. The absence of safe and accessible sanitation facilities also exposes women and girls to significant health and safety risks, including violence and harassment while accessing poorly located toilets.

In India, where socio-economic differences and traditional gender roles often impede progress, efforts to address WASH-related challenges have seen renewed momentum in recent years through initiatives like *Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM)*, *Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM)*, etc., that helped every possible stakeholder to contribute to adopting better WASH practices for the larger welfare of societies.

The Ministry of Women and Child Development (MoWCD) has recognised this intersection and has taken deliberate steps to embed WASH into its missions/schemes to empower women and nurture children. The initiatives of MoWCD underscore the pivotal role of WASH in not just preventing diseases but also in breaking the cycle of malnutrition and gender

disparity. This article explores the deep connection between WASH, gender equality, and child well-being, while highlighting the impact of key government schemes under the MoWCD.

Gender Equality

Women and girls disproportionately bear the burden of inadequate WASH services. They often spend hours collecting water, face challenges related to menstrual hygiene, and are exposed to safety risks due to a lack of safe sanitation facilities. Some of the key gender challenges addressed by WASH are:

- **Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM):** Lack of safe and private facilities affects girls' school attendance and dignity.
- **Safety and Dignity:** Access to toilets reduces exposure to harassment.
- **Time Burden:** Provision of nearby water sources frees up time for education, skill development, and income generation.
- **Empowerment:** Women's participation in community WASH committees strengthens decision-making roles.

Child Well-being

Safe water and sanitation are essential for child survival, growth, and development. Poor WASH contributes to diarrhoeal diseases, malnutrition, and school absenteeism. Some of the key Child Benefits from WASH are:

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- **Improved Health:** Reduction in waterborne diseases like diarrhoea, cholera, and typhoid.
- **Better Nutrition:** Clean environments reduce infections, improving nutrient absorption.
- **Regular Attendance:** Functional toilets, especially for girls, increase enrolment and retention.
- **Early Childhood Development:** Hygiene education in *Anganwadi* Centres (AWCs) supports healthy habits from a young age.

Initiatives to Integrate WASH

The Ministry of Women and Child Development has embedded WASH components into various flagship programmes to achieve gender and child development goals.

1. Mission Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 (Mission Poshan 2.0) are two of the MoWCD's flagship initiatives. It has subsumed *Poshan Abhiyaan*, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), and Scheme for Adolescent Girls (SAG) (14-18 years in NE States and Aspirational Districts) and is instrumental in taking up WASH for not only the target beneficiaries but beyond.

The Mission operates through a network of 14 lakh *Anganwadi* centers covering 10,16,32,373

beneficiaries comprising 63,68,888 pregnant women, 49,23,913 lactating mothers, 44,77,899 children aged 0-6 months, 3,85,66,936 children aged 6 months to 3 years, 4,50,06,648 children aged 3-6 years and 22,88,089 adolescent girls (14-18 years)*. The programme provides a comprehensive package of services, including supplementary nutrition in the form of Hot Cooked Meals (HCM) and Take-Home Rations (THR), Early Childhood Care and Education, and health check-ups and immunisation (in convergence with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare). These centers also serve as platforms for promoting hygiene awareness among children and their families. Ways through which Mission Poshan 2.0 constantly contributes to better WASH practices for all include the following:

- Focus on community-based events (CBEs) and home visits includes hygiene education and demonstration. Since 2018, more than 7 crore CBEs have been conducted at Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) that have sensitised participants to adopt better WASH practices. Similarly, nearly 2 crore home visits are conducted on a monthly basis for children 0-2 years and Pregnant Women, and Lactating Mothers have been sensitised on WASH along with other mandated topics.

- Children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of inadequate WASH conditions. The lack of hygiene in early childhood settings not only affects health outcomes but also school readiness and performance. Therefore, MoWCD has earmarked funds for the construction of toilets and the supply of piped water to AWCs. States/UTs are constantly encouraged to construct toilets and get piped water connections in AWCs. Currently, 10.27 lakh AWCs have functional toilets, and 12.53 lakh have drinking water sources/ facilities.
- Further, as sustainable WASH implementation requires more than infrastructure, community involvement, behavioural change, and inter-sectoral collaboration, the Ministry is collaborating with ministries/departments and other stakeholders through *Jan Andolans* celebrated every year, i.e., *Poshan Maah* in September and *Poshan Pakhwada* in March – April. So far, more than 3.8 crore sensitisation activities on WASH have been reported by States/ UTs since 2018.
- To strengthen, upgrade, and rejuvenate the *Anganwadi* Centres for improved nutrition and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) delivery for stimulating, social, emotional, cognitive and intellectual development of children under 6 years of age, it was decided to upgrade 2 lakh AWCs into 'Saksham Anganwadi Centres' during the Fifteenth Finance Commission Cycle. Envisioned as second-generation *Anganwadi* Centres, *Saksham Anganwadis* have better infrastructure, including LED screens, water filtration systems, material for ECCE and *Poshan Vatikas*. To be eligible for upgradation to *Saksham Anganwadi*, an *Anganwadi* centre must fulfill the basic condition of having Drinking Water Facilities and Functional Toilets.
- Scheme for Adolescent Girls (SAG) focuses on nutritional, health, and hygiene education of around 23 lakh adolescent girls in the age 14-18 years from NE States and Aspirational Districts. It supports menstrual hygiene awareness. The scheme trains peer educators to promote hygienic practices among girls in the community.
- Another notable example is the 'Special Campaign 3.0', which emphasised cleanliness drives across *Anganwadi* centres and public spaces. The campaign highlighted the importance of maintaining a

hygienic environment and mobilised community volunteers and officials to participate actively in *Swachhata* (cleanliness). By involving community members and local governance structures, these programmes foster ownership and sustainability of WASH practices.

By ensuring access to clean water, proper sanitation, and handwashing stations within *Anganwadi* Centres, the Ministry is creating a safe and nurturing environment for children. Hygiene promotion is woven into daily activities and interactions, helping children adopt healthy behaviours early in life. These behaviours not only protect individual children but also reduce the spread of infectious diseases within communities, amplifying the benefits of WASH across social and economic dimensions.

2. Mission Shakti (including Beti Bachao Beti Padhao): Campaigns like *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (BBBP) play a key role in helping this endeavour. This campaign not only focuses on eliminating gender bias but also incorporates hygiene and sanitation components, promoting the idea that the well-being of girls is essential for national development. These interventions collectively aim to break the cycle of gender inequality that often begins with girls dropping out of school due to poor sanitation or menstrual challenges.

3. Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY): While primarily a maternity benefit programme, it encourages antenatal care and counseling on hygiene during pregnancy and childcare. Thereby, it is indirectly promoting clean environments for mothers and infants.

4. Mission Vatsalya: It has an earmarked component named 'Swachhata Action Plan (SAP)' under which funds are provided to States and UTs for taking up activities related to WASH in the Child Care Institutions (CCIs) and service delivery structures. The States/UTs prepare an 'Annual Calendar' for taking up activities under SAP. Thus, through its targeted policies and community-driven programmes, the Ministry of Women and Child Development in India is leveraging WASH as a powerful enabler of gender equality and child well-being. Continued support, innovation, and commitment will be critical to ensuring that every woman and child, regardless of geography or background, has access to the life-changing benefits of WASH. □