



# Water worries: An intersectional feminist political ecology of tourism and water in Labuan Bajo, Indonesia



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## ABSTRACT

Framed in feminist political ecology, this paper presents an intersectional analysis of the gender-water-tourism nexus. Based in an emergent tourism destination, Labuan Bajo, Indonesia, it goes beyond an analysis of how women bear the brunt of burdens related to water scarcity, and examines which women and why and how it affects their daily lives. Based on ethnographic research and speaking to over 100 respondents, the analysis unpicks how patriarchal cultural norms, ethnicity, socio-economic status, life-stage and proximity to water sources are intertwined to (re)produce gendered power relations. While there is heterogeneity of lived experiences, in the most part tourism is out competing locals for access to water leading to women suffering in multiple ways.

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## Introduction

According to the UNWTO, “tourism can empower women in multiple ways... and is a tool to unlock their potential” (2015: p. 2). They also claim that “Tourism can play a crucial role in achieving water access and security for all”. But can global tourism, based on capitalist relations, and putting profit before natural resource conservation coupled with neoliberal water policy really deliver on either of these goals? As Ferguson suggests, for many “tourism perpetuates underdevelopment and the violation of human rights” (2015: p. 474). According to Mostafanezhad et al. (2016), “to remedy this we must first be aware of the intricate interconnections between politics, culture, economy and the physical environment”. This paper unpicks these interlinkages and specifically examines the gendered power relations in relation to water access in an emergent tourism destination. Taking a feminist stance, this paper uses a gendered political ecology framework to explore the intersectional inequalities relating to water access and the related emotional responses.

There is a growing body of literature on water and tourism, which has been reviewed elsewhere (Becken, 2014; Cole, 2012; Cole, 2014; Gössling, Peeters, Hall, Ceron, & Dubois, 2012; Gössling, Hall, & Scott, 2015). Some years ago I noted that “despite access to water being a key indicator of progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals, the intensification of global concerns over water access and availability and the increasing importance of tourism in developing countries, there has been remarkably little academic research into the link between tourism and the impact of water scarcity on destination populations” (Cole, 2012: p. 1223). This remains the case, although Su et al. (2016) have made a useful contribution with their study from Lijiang, China.

The purpose of political ecology is to understand the complex relations between nature and society through a careful analysis of access and control over resources and their implications for the environment (Robbins, 2004; Watts, 2000). As Swyngedouw (2009) has suggested with reference to water distribution, nature and society are fused in inseparable ways

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and political ecology provides a bridge from hydrological science to social science understandings. Feminist political ecology (FPE), a growing field of political ecology (Elmhirst, 2015) treats gender as “a critical variable in shaping resource access and control, interacting with class, caste, race, culture, and ethnicity to shape processes of ecological change,” (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, & Wangari, 1996, p. 4). FPE considers a range of environmental rights and responsibilities including water resources and how those most vulnerable in society are impacted by environmental change (Hanson & Buechler, 2015). Furthermore, “FPE scholarship privilege knowledge of those most affected or marginalised by neoliberal, colonial or patriarchal systems in which tourism and water policy and practice are carried out” (Cole, 2016: p. 33).

The unequal gendered power relations embedded in the tourism sector have been well rehearsed (Gentry, 2007; Schellhorn, 2010; Vandegrift, 2008; Duffy et al., 2015; Ferguson, 2011; Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012), but there has been a failure to consider differential impacts or consequences of tourism developments on men and women. Scholarly work on the environmental impacts of tourism have been largely gender blind, failing to acknowledge the differences between men and women and frequently reinforcing gender stereotypes. Inequalities in terms of access to resources, greater vulnerabilities and disproportionate negative impacts have not yet been subject to systematic gender analysis. Communities have largely been considered homogeneous, for example Mbaiwa (2003), or Saarinen (2016). While Gezon (2014) noted the importance of comparing impacts on neighbouring communities “the communities” in each location were undifferentiated. In this paper I take a specifically gendered analysis of the impact of tourism on water resources.

In Labuan Bajo, economic development, as part of Indonesian neoliberal policies, has promoted tourism growth at any cost with little space for alternative discourses (Dale, 2015) and led to price rises and competition for natural resources, including water. As in many societies, women are responsible for domestic water provision and management. These roles are often “naturalised”, unpaid, and unrecognised but mean that women live with issues of water scarcity and contamination on a daily basis. Their water work is part of reproductive labour, lacks visibility, and yet while integral to water supply, women are frequently excluded from water distribution policy and decision making. However, not all women experience issues of water scarcity to the same extent. This paper considers not only how women bear a disproportionate share of the hidden costs of tourism development, but also unpicks the differential impact on different groups of women and explores how they deal with their daily water struggles.

This paper contributes both to tourism studies and FPE as the first paper to use a framework of feminist political ecology to explore the gender-tourism-water nexus and examine how gender norms are negotiated in the course of environmental struggles, as Elmhirst (2011) suggests. It is also the first study to attempt an intersectional analysis of tourism and water scarcity at the destination level. It reinforces the work of Vandegrift (2008) that dissolved the guest-host divide and explored the racisms underlying tourism labour; whilst also underscoring Sultana’s (2011) work on water and emotions, cross fertilizing important FPE work into tourism studies.

Following an introduction to intersectional analysis I review first how it has added to the rich FPE in water studies and its limited use in tourism research. I then provide the context in some depth, before examining the methodology including my positionality, data collection and analysis. I then unpick the water-gender-tourism nexus, unravelling water work, patriarchy and tourism labour and the differentiated women’s experiences and their suffering for water.

### **Women are not homogenous: Intersectionality**

Intersectionality, a term coined by Crenshaw (1989), stresses the interwoven nature of categories of oppression, has become “institutionalised in sociology” (Collins, 2015: p. 2). Intersectionality explores how categories of identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, ability, age, sexuality etc. are mutually constructing and interrelated and shape systems of power, producing complex social inequalities that vary over time and space (Bel hooks, 1989); and that “the complex social inequalities fostered by intersecting systems of power are fundamentally unjust” (Collins, 2015: p. 6). There are three strands of intersectional studies: as a field of study, as an analytical strategy, and as critical praxis. This study falls into the second i.e. “how intersectional frameworks provide new angles of vision on social institutions, practices, social problems, and other social phenomena associated with social inequality” (Collins, 2015: p. 5). Intersectionality is influenced by post-colonial studies considering how capitalism, patriarchy and ethnicity inform women’s subordination (Mollett and Faria, 2013). In FPE nature or ecology are added to explore how multiple forms of social inequality intersect with nature (Nightingale, 2011); in this case proximity to a water source is added to competition from tourism, a patriarchal culture, ethnicity and life stage as factors that re-inforce women’s inequality.

#### *Intersectionality and water*

It is well known that women and men often have differentiated relationships to water access, uses, knowledges, governance, and experiences, and these gendered inequities are rooted in gendered divisions of labour (Ahlers & Zwarteveen, 2009) which associate women with water. Further, as Harris, Phartiyal, Scott, and Peloso (2015) suggest from a FPE perspective, these relationships can be mediated by gendered labour practices, socio-cultural expectations, as well as intersectional differences (e.g. race, income, and so forth). The most common intersection explored is between gender and poverty, in a variety of forms e.g. landlessness (Harris, 2008); home ownership and employment (Harris et al. 2015). Truelove (2011) suggests the FPE approach provides a more focused attention on constructions of social difference and micro-politics within the

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