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‘Spaces of Exclusion’ in community water governance: A Feminist Political Ecology of gender and participation in Malawi’s Urban Water User Associations

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ABSTRACT

Much of the literature on gender dimensions of community-based water governance focuses on irrigation systems in rural areas. Largely overlooked is how gender dynamics influence participation in community-based urban water governance systems. To address this gap, we use insights from Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) to examine whether and how community-based governance of drinking water in an urban context leads to (in) equitable gender participation and decision making. Using household surveys ($n = 415$), key informant interviews ($n = 19$), focus-group discussions ($n = 14$), we explore gender dynamics and power relations underpinning participation, decision making processes, and employment and benefit sharing arrangements among Water User Associations (WUAs) in the urban informal settlements of Lilongwe, Malawi. We find that WUAs do not guarantee equitable gender participation. Rather, inequitable participation is simply reified through: (1) gendered representation in WUA structures; (2) socio-cultural practices and women’s self-exclusion; and (3) community micro-politics and power relations. Our findings contradict the notion that community-based governance of water leads to equitable participation and empowerment of women. The policy implications are that without systematic efforts to incorporate women’s needs, interests, and voices, so-called participatory approaches to water governance will only serve to suppress women’s agency and reinforce existing gender-based inequalities. Future work will explore the pathways to women’s leadership in the WUAs and interrogate how women on the board and executive committees navigate their way up the hierarchy, their experiences in a male-dominated water governance scheme and their recommendations for how WUAs can improve women’s participation.

1. Introduction

This article uses insights from Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) to examine whether and how community-based governance of drinking water in an urban context leads to equitable gender participation in decision making. In many developing countries, access to drinking water is a more pressing need for women, particularly because they are responsible not only for fetching water, but also performing domestic chores that require water (Moser, 1989; Mandara et al., 2014). Even though women bear a disproportionate burden of functional water management at the household and community levels, they are often excluded from formal water governance, (Zwarteveen, 1997; Crow and Sultana, 2002; Ivens, 2008). To address these inequities in women’s participation in water governance, the United Nations (UN), World

Bank, and other global institutions advocate ‘gender mainstreaming,’ a strategy originated to advance the equal representation of women and men in water resources planning and decision making (Kabeer, 2003). Likewise, the Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development (1992)—precursor to the Integrated Water Resources Management framework—called for the explicit participation of women in water decision making given their central role in water retrieval, treatment, and management, while the UN’s declaration of the International Decade for Water (2005–2015) also called for equal gender representation in water and sanitation management (UN, 2015a). Similarly, the UN’s former Millennium Development Goals (Goal 3) and current Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 5) both emphasize gender equality and women’s empowerment in the context of water management (UN, 2015b).

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Despite the growing appeal of policies and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality, significant gender disparities in decision making are prevalent in the water and sanitation sector, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa (Meinzen-Dick and Zwarteveen, 1998; Alston, 2014). Many reforms predicated on bridging gender gaps in community participation have emerged in recent decades. These include decentralization and other bottom-up policy reforms that emphasize local participation, especially of women in water planning and governance (Harris, 2009; Adams and Zulu, 2015). However, it is not well understood whether these emergent community-based water governance models could enhance women's participation.

Malawi, the focus of our paper, has initiated decentralization programs in the water sector that among other things promise greater participation in water governance. These initiatives led to the emergence of Water User Associations (WUAs), which not only aim to improve water supply in underserved areas, but catalyze community participation, ownership, and empowerment in the water sector (Ferguson and Mulwafu, 2004). This paper uses these WUAs in urban Malawi to examine the gendered implications of decentralized, community-based water reforms. The central question the paper addresses is: *does community-based water governance in urban Malawi lead to (in) equitable gender participation in decision making, and, if so, how?* To answer this question, we use mixed methods (surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions) and theoretical insights from Feminist Political Ecology (FPE). We draw on FPE as a framework to interrogate how power relations interact with socio-cultural norms and practices to reproduce social difference, subjectivities, and gendered participation in water governance. We focus, in particular on women's exclusion from decision making in the WUA activities.

The paper contributes to feminist geographies of water by demonstrating that equitable inclusion is not a default outcome of community-based water governance. Conscious efforts such as affirmative action and policies will be required to ensure the meaningful participation of marginalized groups (especially women) in such governance arrangements. Furthermore, the paper contributes to the growing call to better understand gender implications of recent water policy shifts from centralized to neoliberal and community-based models that simultaneously emphasize both cost recovery and participation (Harris, 2009). Theoretically, this paper extends FPE's engagement with water governance (Truelove, 2011; Sultana, 2011) by addressing how the interplay of socio-cultural norms, community micro-politics, spatiality of bodies, and unequal power relations lead to gendered outcomes. Advances in FPE literature have focused primarily on the material dimensions of water. This paper focuses instead on 'non-material' aspects of water, in particular the decision and policy making processes and the socio-spatial relations that underpin inequitable gender participation. In the context of Malawi, we investigate the gap between gender-based policy rhetoric and actual outcomes, identify the uneven power relations between men and women within WUAs, and offer recommendations for more equitable gender participation in these associations. Equitable participation creates opportunities in water management not only for women, but for all genders, sexes, and identities—males included. Moreover, benefits of women's participation in water management may trickle down to other vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, and persons with disability who often rely on women's domestic and caretaker roles.

In the following sections, we discuss prior work on gender and participation in water governance. Next, we discuss why FPE provides a useful framework to explore how gendered power relations unfold in community-based urban water governance. Finally, we outline the water policy context in Malawi, including the emergence of WUAs, before presenting the methods, results and discussion, and conclusion.

2. Gender relations and participatory water governance

The gender and development literature suggests that women in

African (and other developing) societies bear a disproportionate brunt of the water burden compared to men (Rathgeber, 1996; Derman and Ferguson, 2003; Upadhyay, 2003; Truelove, 2011; Sultana, 2011). Case studies demonstrate that women are not only excluded from decision making around water, but that these decisions also more greatly affect their livelihoods, health and overall well-being (de Moraes and Rocha, 2013; Figueiredo and Perkins, 2013). As a result, it is argued that women participation and decision in water governance are necessary for the creation of a more sustainable water management system as well as a fairer and healthier society (Mandara et al., 2017, 2014). However, questions remain over why women's actual participation in water management and governance remains low, what obstacles prevent women from participating, and whether equal participation of men and women in water management leads to better outcomes, including community empowerment.

The literature on gender and participation in water management is extensive (Meinzen-Dick and Zwarteveen, 1998; Prokopy, 2005; Gleitsmann et al., 2007). However, most of the existing literature focuses on the gendered implications and participatory mechanisms associated with irrigation and water management in rural areas. The majority of this literature draws a similar conclusion: women's participation in water planning and decision making is low compared to men (Hemson, 2002) despite some evidence that their participation may lead to better and more sustainable outcomes in water management (Meinzen-Dick and Zwarteveen, 1998). This inequitable participation is often due historically ingrained power relations, micro-politics, and gender dynamics at different scales (Hawkins and Seager, 2010). In rural Bangladesh, for example, gendered participation in water governance is influenced by traditional norms as well as power, class, and geographic location (Sultana, 2007). In recent work, Harris et al. (2016) draw attention to intersectional gender analysis, which calls for a more nuanced analysis of gendered experiences beyond the male-female orthodoxy that has long dominated the gender and development literature. Overall, analyses must incorporate broader social relations, actors, and resources, and how they shape women's agency in water management and governance (Cleaver and Hamada, 2010).

Socio-cultural norms have far-reaching effects on natural resource management and governance, particularly in developing regions. These constructs often manifest in long-standing practices that constrain and even prohibit women's involvement in decision making (Agarwal, 2001). In Tanzania, for example, women were unable to participate in village water committees due to cultural roles (e.g., child care, cooking, etc.) that left them little to no time to participate in committee activities (Michael, 1998). Michael (1998) also found that women rarely took leadership positions on water committees and—even when husbands were supportive—patriarchy, skepticism, and stereotypical assumptions of female leadership undermined their willingness to participate. Similarly, Mandara et al. (2017) argue that while formal decision making spaces are created to enhance women's participation, androcentric norms and traditions often impede success. While these scholarly contributions are important, how gender dynamics influence participation in community-based governance of urban water systems has not been thoroughly explored.

Much of the existing literature on gender and water focuses on rural areas and irrigation systems, the same being true for Malawi (Marra, 2008). The scant literature on community-based water governance in the urban context has had limited engagement with gender dimensions of participation. In this study, we examine the gender dimensions of domestic water use in an urban context by examining whether community-based water governance in urban Malawi led to (in)equitable gender participation in decision making, and if so, how? We advance the literature on community-based water governance by attending to at least two notable gaps: (1) the dearth of research on urban communities; and (2) the limited engagement of urban water research on gender dimensions of participation. In the case of Malawi, this study constitutes the first such attempt to investigate the gender dimensions

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