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EDITED AND REVIEWED BY
Andrea J. Nightingale,
University of Oslo, Norway

*CORRESPONDENCE
Deepa Joshi
✉ deepa.joshi@cgiar.org

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Editorial: Changing the discourse: from the rhetoric on women and water to a feminist water agenda

Deepa Joshi^{1*}, Alan Nicol¹, Valentina Peveri² and Amit Mitra³

¹International Water Management Institute, Colombo, Sri Lanka, ²The American University of Rome (AUR), Rome, Italy, ³Independent Researcher, New Delhi, India

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Changing the discourse: from the rhetoric on women and water to a feminist water agenda

International declarations since the 1970s have emphasized that “water matters significantly to women.” Half a century on, women and girls still spend around 200 million hours every day collecting water for domestic use. This situation looks set not just to continue, but to worsen, given declarations of “an unprecedented water crisis”¹. Women’s bodies will continue to bear the burdens of successive unmet development goals on the part of governments and the international community. This is not the only challenge. A recent World Bank study reveals that only 20% of water sector jobs across the Global North and South are held by women. What these numbers also reveal is that very little work has been done in transforming masculine, technical water institutions², which were colonially established around the Global South and instrumental in determining unequal systems of access, use and control of water resources.

In this Research Topic we spotlight the rhetoric on gender and water that has persisted in contradiction to what appears on the outside as an encouraging institutionalization of gender in water. In feminist terms, gender inequalities in water refers to many things at multiple levels. There is the socialization that makes women responsible for domestic water access and use, almost universally. The popularization of gender in water supply and sanitation since the 1980s has demonstrated no attempt to change this ‘stereotyping of women’s domestic water roles’ (Ahlers and Zwartveen, 2009). In contrast, women’s roles in water for production, and the health and nutrition implications of these interlinkages have been much less recognized, and again only in the same instrumentalist ways that problematize women and ‘ignore the history and culture of unequal sociocultural practices, values and relationships’ (Mitra and Rao, 2019). The fact that these blindspots persist is

1 UN Water Conference 2023.

2 ‘Boys and their toys’: how overt masculinity dominates Australia’s relationship with water (theconversation.com).

an outcome of the fact that ‘water knowledge is written “from the center”’ (see Ahlers and Zwartveen, 2009), from a viewpoint that is entirely masculine. This explains the invisibility of deeply embodied everyday water challenges in overtly positivist water solutions, technologies, interventions and policies which do little to tackle deeply-rooted gender inequalities. A feminist viewpoint does not aim to capture nuances of women’s lives in isolation, only within the restricted conjugal bonds at the household/community levels, but places these within the wider plot of relationships of power, above all, between different stakeholders across scales – at individual and institutional levels, and across the landscape of what drives water policy, knowledge, politics and economy. Moreover, the problem is not just the inadequate or uneven *inclusion of women*, but an inadequate *engagement with alternative, feminist viewpoints*. In fact, the focus of the gender in development discourse has been only on “women and girls,” and rarely on the multiple oppressions at play, that exacerbate vulnerabilities to water as a living resource, a global commons (UN Women, 2023).

The five articles presented here reveal why we argue that the contemporary gender-water discourse is derailed, directionless, and ultimately unfit for purpose and impact. The articles also signal what it will take to achieve real change – namely a feminist agenda that can tackle blatant and latent rules of the game on water that are firmly rooted in a prevailing patriarchy. Most of the articles discussed here demonstrate a feminist framework that accounts for an intersectional sensitivity. The term *intersectionality*, coined by feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, invokes a discourse that challenges normalized categories of women (or men) which make invisible the multiple, interlocking identities by gender, class, caste, ethnicity, race, age, ability, sexuality, and more, and the power relations and political economic dynamics that shape them.

Khadka et al. writing on WASH initiatives in Nepal highlight that despite strategic policy reforms, the water sector continues to be defiantly infrastructure-centric, and inclusion policies have made little dent on centuries-old practices of caste-gender hierarchies. Liebrand’s article, also on Nepal, explains why transformative change is not easy in a sector that is historically rooted in a colonially-established and deeply masculine narrative of water technology, science and bureaucracy. Decades of gender mainstreaming in such a context have certainly provided space to women in water institutions, as they now also do in political bodies (Khadka et al.), but on the implicit understanding that there is no disruption of carefully preserved cultures and hierarchies by gender as well as caste.

The act of depoliticizing water vis-a-vis genuinely challenging the status quo is encouraged and rewarded. Hence alongside decades of gender mainstreaming to integrate women in masculine settings and contexts, the popular practice in gender research for development has been to focus on highlighting, but not challenging or transforming, the gendered dynamics of land and water. The article by Hillesland et al. provides a nuanced overview of formal and informal rights to land and water in Kenya, and how women rely on complex social networks to negotiate access to water. And yet this article, like many other descriptive narratives on gender roles and practices in relation to water, begs attention to a key question: how might we do research differently if our goal is

not just to collate gender-disaggregated data, but essentially to decolonize science?

The article by Fowler aptly captures the failings in popular women-gender research for development, reminding us that «feminism is essentially about a “politics of changing the world” (see Ahmed, 2022)». This includes «deciding who, what, when, why, and how to do scholarship as well as by determining the voice, style, tone, and outlet for sharing research results (ibid)». Fowler’s ethnographic “deep-hanging out” with three women in the Kodi region of Sumba (Indonesia) shows the complex politics within and beyond the villages that are shaping hydrosocial systems. Fowler not only discusses these findings, but equally and more importantly outlines feminist, decolonized principles of doing research.

On the same lines, Narayanaswamy et al. point out that the power and politics around water (in)security are mirrored in the ways in which knowledge as well as research partnerships operate and actualize. The question they ask is: «how do we bring a more feminist ethics of care and socio-ecological justice in the ways in which we convene and function in international, interdisciplinary research?» Tensions and contradictions are common especially when large, interdisciplinary teams of researchers from the Global North and South cooperate on research initiatives designed to address, in this case, the complex, nuanced issue of water (in)security. Narayanaswamy et al. argue that research adds value only if we are able to extend the principles of justice we profess in our research into practices of addressing hierarchies and inequalities that are commonplace in international teams.

A key learning from these articles is that very little has changed by way of gender inequalities in water, because we are all conditioned in multiple ways to adjust to the knowledge from the center. For example, the dismal statistics of water access for women should enrage all who have argued against and witnessed decade after decade of broken promises to make gender equality a central goal of development. Yet the outrage simply isn’t there. Instead, we have a litany of more promises: *water for all, putting the last first, leaving no one behind*, etc. Very clearly poor and marginalized women are being and have been left very, very far behind as others race far ahead. As we contemplate an ever-growing water crisis, we are, shockingly, doing very little to change this situation. If we did consider how intersectionality plays into these crises, then we might have been a little further ahead in planning for the transformational change required.

Global Early Warning Tools demonstrate how millions of women and girls will likely face disproportionate future water scarcity and stress. Tools like the Individual Water and Security Experience Scales (IOWAS) (<https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/wise-scales/measure-water-insecurity/index.html>) capture how water insecurity affects not just women’s labor, time, energy, nutrition and opportunities for social and economic growth, but can also damage their mental health. Yet these data sources remain much too peripheral to water policymaking, planning and investment.

We do not need more evidence that the water and climate crisis is also, therefore, a gender crisis. Unfortunately, current faultiness in policy and practice and the sector’s overtly technical and econometric focus blur and make invisible the entrenched and oppressive social norms and power relations.

In this context, what is possible, and what is practiced, is an apolitical focus on gender as being about water at the household and community levels for an often homogenous category of women. What remains unchanged is the inequality of water chores imposed on women within households, and the patriarchy and masculinities of control across water sector institutions from top to bottom in water management and decision-making.

Meanwhile, the web of power, politics and patriarchy remains steadfast in the corridors of water decision-making. The talk of “technical” fixes overrides the very real need for substantial political change at the level of systems and structures – everywhere. Instead of urgent transformative action, we see inertia and resistance – and this makes for a strange contradiction with more global declarations, resolutions, and targets on equality. In case we should hesitate to call out for a Feminist Water Agenda, we need only to remind ourselves that women activists across the Global South are often punished, and very severely, for questioning inconsistencies and inequalities in relation to water.

The water sector should draw on the examples from an increasing number of donors who have taken bold strides to embrace a feminist development agenda. As water scholars and practitioners, we ask — how will we build upon these changes? To be very clear: the one thing a feminist agenda *is not* is mere tokenism or empty, polite talk. A feminist agenda entails a seismic shift at the heart of which is dismantling the foundations of a failed water development process fraught with overt masculinities, social exclusions and injustices. In this editorial we therefore call for solidarity of voices and responsibilities in completely overhauling the structures and cultures that perpetuate the status quo.

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