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# GENDER AND WATER: RIGHTS, PARTICIPATION, AND THE COMMONS

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***Abstract***

*Water policy has tended to treat the household as its smallest unit and to assume that its members share equally in water's benefits and burdens. This paper argues that the assumption is false and consequential, and that water is deeply gendered in ways that policy ignores at its peril. Drawing on the scholarship of gender and water rights in South Asia, it shows that the work of securing water, above all the fetching and managing of domestic water, falls disproportionately on women, while the rights to water and the voice in its governance rest disproportionately with men. This mismatch, between those who bear water's burdens and those who hold its rights, is the central fact of the gendered geography of water, and it shapes both the equity and the effectiveness of water management. The paper argues that the participatory institutions increasingly favoured in water governance will reproduce rather than remedy this inequity unless they are designed to include women substantively, and that formal water rights, cast in the language of landholding, systematically disadvantage those who use water but do not own land. It concludes that attending to gender is not an optional refinement of water policy but a condition of its justice and its success.*

***Keywords:*** *gender; water rights; participation; commons; South Asia*

## 1. Introduction

Water policy, when it descends to the local scale at all, usually stops at the household, treating it as the smallest unit of analysis and assuming that whatever serves the household serves its members alike. This assumption is convenient and false. Within the household, and within the community, water's benefits and burdens are distributed unequally along the lines of gender: the labour of obtaining and managing water, and the rights to control and decide about it, fall on different people. This paper examines that gendered distribution, drawing on the scholarship of gender and water in South Asia, and argues that the mismatch between who bears water's burdens and who holds its rights is a central and neglected fact of water, with consequences for both the justice and the effectiveness of its management.

The paper first sets out the gendered division of water's labour and rights, then examines how formal water rights disadvantage women, then considers why participatory governance may reproduce rather than remedy the inequity, and finally argues for the centrality of gender to water policy. The treatment is conceptual, drawing on the gender-and-water scholarship.

## 2. The gendered division of water

The first fact of the gendered geography of water is a division of labour and of rights that run in opposite directions. In most of rural South Asia, the work of securing domestic water, the daily fetching, carrying, and managing of water for the household, is women's work, a burden that can consume hours of a woman's day and much of her physical effort, and that grows heavier as sources recede or fail (Meinzen-Dick & Zwarteveen, 1998). Yet the rights to water, the recognised entitlements to use and control it, and the voice in the institutions that govern it, rest largely with men, who are treated as the household's representatives in matters of water as in matters of land. The result is a systematic mismatch: those who do the work of water hold few of its rights, and those who hold the rights do little of the work. This mismatch is not incidental but structural, rooted in the broader gendering of labour and authority, and it means that the people with the deepest practical stake in and knowledge of domestic water are the people least empowered in its governance (Meinzen-Dick & Zwarteveen, 1998).

**3. Rights, land, and the disadvantaging of women**

This mismatch is reinforced by the way formal water rights are constituted. Rights to water, particularly for irrigation, are commonly tied to the ownership of land, so that the right to water follows the title to the field it irrigates. Because landownership itself is heavily gendered, with land titled overwhelmingly in men's names, water rights cast in the language of landholding pass to men almost by default, and women, who may do much of the agricultural labour but rarely hold the land, are correspondingly excluded from the water rights attached to it (Meinzen-Dick & Zwarteveen, 1998). The problem is compounded for domestic water, which the framework of land-based rights scarcely recognises at all, treating water as an input to production rather than as a necessity of life, and so leaving the water that women labour to secure for the household outside the system of formal entitlement. The language and structure of water rights, in short, systematically disadvantage those who use water without owning land, a category in which women are heavily over-represented, and formalising rights without attention to gender tends to harden rather than relieve the inequity (Meinzen-Dick & Zwarteveen, 1998).

**4. The limits of participation**

The turn toward participatory and community-based water governance, increasingly favoured as a corrective to centralised management, might seem to promise a remedy, by bringing decisions closer to those affected. But the gendered scholarship cautions that participation, naively implemented, is likely to reproduce the existing inequity rather than to remedy it. Communities are internally differentiated, and the institutions through which they govern shared resources tend to reflect and reinforce the distribution of power within them, so that a water-users' association or a village water committee, left to form on existing lines, will be dominated by the men who already hold water's rights and authority, and will marginalise the women who bear its burdens (Meinzen-Dick & Zwarteveen, 1998; Agrawal & Gibson, 1999). Participation in such a body is not the same as influence within it, and women may be formally included yet substantively unheard. The general lesson of the commons scholarship, that effective collective governance depends on institutions that give voice to the weaker members and not merely on the existence of a community, applies with particular force to gender: participatory water institutions will serve

women only if they are deliberately designed to include women substantively, with attention to the barriers of time, mobility, and social norm that otherwise silence them (Ostrom, 1990; Agrawal & Gibson, 1999).

**5. Why gender is central**

Attending to gender is therefore not an optional refinement of water policy but a condition of both its justice and its effectiveness. It is a condition of justice because the existing arrangement loads the burden of water onto those with the least say in its governance and the fewest rights to it, an inequity that water policy, by assuming the undifferentiated household, silently perpetuates. And it is a condition of effectiveness because the people who do the work of domestic water, and who therefore hold the most intimate knowledge of its sources and its failures, are women, so that water management which excludes them forfeits that knowledge and the engagement of its most committed stewards. A water policy blind to gender will misallocate rights, build institutions that exclude, and forgo the knowledge and effort of half the community; a policy that sees gender can align rights with use, design institutions that include, and draw on the knowledge of those who know water best. The same equity that a changing, water-stressed world will demand of water governance thus turns out to be, in the gendered case, also a route to governing water well (Meinzen-Dick & Zwarteveen, 1998; Narain, 2009).

**6. Conclusion**

Water is gendered, and water policy that assumes the undifferentiated household misses the central fact that the burden of water and the rights to it fall on different people. Women do the work of securing domestic water while men hold its rights and its governing voice, an inequity reinforced by water rights tied to male-held land and liable to be reproduced by participatory institutions that mirror existing power. Remedying this requires casting water rights to recognise those who use water without owning land, and designing participatory institutions to include women substantively rather than formally. Attending to gender is not a refinement but a requirement of water policy, for it is a condition both of the justice of water's distribution and of the effectiveness of its management. To govern water well, policy must first see who carries it.

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