

Women's Water Woes: Privatization and Reinforcement of Gender Inequality

Written by Michele Cantos

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Introduction

Rapid population growth, urbanization, expanding global economies, and climate change are changing the geography and landscape of communities and are putting enormous pressure on the planet's limited fresh water supply. By 2025, all of Africa and the Middle East, as well as almost all of South and Central America and Asia, will either be running out of water or will be unable to afford its cost (IWMI 2000). The high costs of water infrastructure and the inefficiencies of public management systems, among other factors, have made meeting the basic needs of water supply and sanitation an arduous task for cities. Under the guise of efficiency and conservation, international institutions and private companies have pushed the adoption of a neoliberal water project, whose reforms include outsourcing public water treatment and water distribution services to private entities, also known as the privatization (Bakker 2005).

The privatization and commoditization of a life-giving substance such as water raises the question of water allocation, that is, whose claim to how much water is recognized, and involves complex distributional choices that are intrinsically political (Ahlers and Zwartveen 2011). As privatization takes place in the confines of an urban space, and because of the patriarchal-defined gendered divisions of labor and socially appropriate uses of water, which put the burden of collecting and managing water on women and shape their relationship to water, the people most severely impacted by these distributional choices are disproportionately women and girls living in slums and informal settlements. For example, unlike their male counterparts, women in Africa collectively spend 200 million hours per day collecting water (UNDP 2006) and make up over half of the 1.2 billion people who do not have access to water (WSSCC 2004). As a result, their responsibilities to collect and manage water put them at risk of developing physical disorders and severely reducing their chances to engage in other productive activities (Obando 2003). A power dynamic underlying water allocation, in which gender inequality is a critical structuring force, clearly exists (Ahlers and Zwartveen 2011).

Drawing from feminist agendas that once pled for women's independent ownership of resources (i.e. land titles) as a way to achieve women's emancipation or liberation (Agarwal 1994; Deere and de Leon 2001), proponents of the neoliberal water project and even several feminist scholars suggest that water privatization offers the possibilities for realizing feminist ambitions (see Vera 2005; Zwartveen 1997). However, the neoliberal water project hides unequal power dynamics in water allocation and reproduces gendered power imbalances. The aim of this article is to refute the notion that reductionist neoliberal reforms in the water sector can address gender inequalities, or larger inequalities for that matter, as these do not address wider political, economic, and historical structures that undermine the rights of women (Ahlers and Zwartveen 2011). Rather, the reforms reproduce gender biases, create dangers of alienability of individual water, and offer possibilities for dispossession (ibid).

This paper is informed by examples of water used in urban slums and informal settlements and the unique water experiences and concerns of women and girls living in these contexts, as this allows for an intersectional analysis that acknowledge not only gender but also broader socio-economic factors. As this essay is not addressing the technicalities of the living situation in either context, and it is certainly not drawing comparisons between the two, but

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rather is making a statement about inequality and socio-spatial differences entrenched in the gendered dimensions of privatization, the essay uses the terms slums (areas of older housing that are deteriorating in the sense of their being underserved, overcrowded, and dilapidated) and informal settlements (defined as either areas where groups of housing units have been constructed on land that the occupants have no legal claim to or unplanned settlements where housing is not in compliance with current planning and building regulations) interchangeably (UNSD 1997). The essay also invokes the term neoliberalization, with respect to water governance, quite loosely, as it is not always necessarily equivalent to neoliberal ideals or processes (Bakker 2007, 2003, 2005), but rather provides the language to describe the economic and political global context in which water privatization occurs.

Using the analytical framework of Feminist Political Ecology, which examines the nature–society nexus with gender inequality as a critical factor, the essay will position the effects of the privatization on women in the realm of structural violence and explain why it is not conducive to fulfilling contemporary feminist water agendas. While the essay focuses on the intersections of inequality and socio–spatial difference and resource privatization, it is important to note that this intersection is largely neglected within the gender and development discourse (Harris 2009; Ahlers and Zwarteveen 2011), overshadowed by issues of gender in rural settings and partly due to the theoretical account of the “urban advantage,” which focuses on the relative advantage of urban dwellers’ access to water vis-à-vis their rural counterparts (Kuate-Defo 1996; Lalou & Legrand 1997). However, it is important to study issues of gender within urban and rural contexts, as many linkages between them such as rural-to-urban migration and the politics of citizenship and representation exist. Indeed, Harris (2009) urges gender theorists and those engaged in debates of water governance to pay more attention to gender, feminist theory and approaches to inequality and socio-spatial differences, and further, to be critical of elements of gender and water literature that endorse recent neoliberal water governance shifts.

To make these points, the essay proceeds as follows. First, using the lens of feminist political ecology to deconstruct inequality and socio-spatial differences, it explains the gendered dimensions of water use in urban slums and informal settlements. Second, in order to contextualize the use of water in an urban space and in a water privatization, it provides a brief literary account of the conception of water as an element of social power. Continuing, to make the case that the end result of privatized water is, simply put, inequitable access to privatized water, the essay highlights the direct and indirect impacts of privatization on women and girls of urban slums and informal settlements. Finally, the essay restates the issue and positions it within the context of an impending water crisis by considering what are more accurate contemporary feminist water agendas and what alternatives do these propose.

Women, Water, and Society

In order to fully understand the shift towards water privatization and its suggested implications for combating gender inequality, it is important to first have a conceptual and contextual understanding of the structural forces that make water a gendered issue. A useful analytical framework to study the broader relationships between natural resources and societies is Feminist Political Ecology.

Political ecology, of which Feminist Political Ecology is a subfield, highlights the relationship between environmental degradation and conservation, the neoliberalization of nature, capitalist accumulation and expansion, dispossession, history, politics, and power (Sneddon 2000; Redclift 1993). This analytical lens emphasizes the connection between environmental degradation and the political and economic structures that benefit from destructive, exploitative, and extractivist human economies and societies. This area of inquiry would agree that the most impacted by the monstrous effects of climate change are the world’s poor, and their plight reflects the larger structural violence that marginalized communities face within the world’s increasingly commercialization of natural resources.

Feminist Political Ecology takes this analysis a step further and considers the gendered dimensions to these aforementioned issues (Rocheleau et al 1996; Carney 1993). Feminist political ecologists advocate that for gender to be considered in environmental analysis, attention needs to be made to gendered differences in knowledge, rights, access, control, and organization vis-à-vis the environment (Sultana 2006). Rocheleau et al (ibid) provided a framework that treated gender as:

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A critical variable in shaping resource access and control, interacting with class, caste, race, culture, and ethnicity to shape processes of ecological change, the struggle of men and women to sustain ecologically viable livelihoods, and the prospects of any community for 'sustainable development'.... focusing on three key themes: "gendered environmental knowledge's, gendered environmental rights and responsibilities, and gendered environmental (ibid.).

That is water issues pose disproportionate disadvantages for women and girls that reflect broader politics, power struggles, and patriarchal structures that intersect to oppress women outside of the water domain. Therefore, these should be considered when deconstructing the power dynamics that manipulate water access, rights, and control.

The intersectionality of women's oppression is, unfortunately, well illustrated by the case of women and girls living in the slums and informal settlements of the developing world. Because their access to safe drinking water is limited and/or sporadic, they are obliged to accept exorbitantly high and unfair prices for unsafe water, and as a result, they run the risk of using water that is contaminated by industrial waste while the close living conditions with their neighbors, combined with a severe lack of sanitation services, leads to the quick spread of disease from fecal waste. In this first dimension of the gender-water nexus, women are disadvantaged by the mere spatial constraints of living in a slum or informal settlement, which does impair them from accessing basic water and sanitation services.

In the predominantly patriarchal societies, in which women and girls of the developing world live in, their main roles and responsibilities are within the confines of the domestic sphere and include daily tasks such as cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, and providing child and elderly care, all of which require varying amounts of clean and potable water. Women and girls' responsibilities as they relate to water have ensured that they are disproportionately affected by a lack of water and are put at risk of being assaulted or kidnapped on their way to fetch water, as well as causing them physical and emotional toil and severely reducing their chances to engage in other productive activities such as education, income generation, politics, leisure, and recreation (Obando 2003). In this second dimension of the gender-water nexus, gendered divisions of labor that may trace their roots to religious, cultural, and even colonial, antecedents disadvantage women immensely. These gendered divisions of labor are extremely problematic because they bring daily stress to women and girls and prevent them from fully engaging in their societies, locking them into a vicious cycle of poverty that has cascading effects on their households and community, adding another dimension to their suffering, that of daily emotional distress and the possible health repercussions.

One of the main reasons why the essay draws examples of water usage in the slums is because of the stark contrast between the women and girls in the slums and informal settlements of the world's growing cities and their middle and upper middle class counterparts. In any study, class-based inequalities among women is another dimension that needs to be considered about water, gender mainstreaming, and alternative solutions to issues of water governance. In Sultana, Mohanty, and Mariglia's 2013 study of women's water preferences in the slum of Korali, the largest informal settlement in Dhaka Bangladesh, the world's most rapidly growing city, the authors find that in Korali:

Class-based inequalities among women have undermined a number of efforts to provide access to clean water or empower women to participate in community decision-making. The power relations and social hierarchies that exist among women materialize in ways that silence poor women and allow wealthier women to assert their interests as representing those of the whole (Sultana, Mohanty and Mariglia 2013).

This explicates that while wealthier women may still hold many domestic and water focused responsibilities, they do not have to worry about water in the same way that their poorer counterparts do. Wealthier women can use water for more than just "survival activities" like watering their lawns or filling up their swimming pools, while in the slums the little amount of water available is used for daily life-sustaining activities (ibid). Therefore, "essentializing women" (see Warren 1980, for an Eco Feminist stance), that is attributing women's actions and relations to nature with that of their biological features, rather than the socio-political factors that contribute to their oppression and marginalization, could blind many to the intersectionality of women's identities and hide the fact that women experience life differently across the socioeconomic spectrum.

An additional dimension of the gender-water nexus is the many unwritten rules and cultural stigmas that govern men and women's actions in relation to water. In Korali, for example, because bathing publicly is not "socially appropriate

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feminine" behavior, men can bathe in the waters of the Gushan Lake, but women are prohibited from doing so (Sultana, Mohanty and Mariglia, 2013). Since the women cannot bathe in the lake as the men do, and because water access in the slum is sporadic, the women of Korali often have to go without bathing or have insufficient water for sanitation. Not only is this uncomfortable to them at a personal level, especially during the summer months, but it is an "added suffering" for women, as they live in a culture that highly values personal hygiene and which uses water for religious ablution and spiritual purification (ibid). Regardless of the important role that women play in water collection and its management within the household, patriarchal ideologies and community structures shape those gendered divisions of labor and are evident in men and women's relations with water—the right to access, to control, or even to spend leisure time in it (Sultana, 2006).

Although proponents of the neoliberal water project and even several feminist scholars suggest that water privatization offers possibilities for realizing feminist ambitions (see Vera 2005; Zwartveen 1997), similar arguments have been applied to water drawn from feminist agendas that once pled for women's independent ownership of resources (i.e. land titles), as a way to achieve women's emancipation or liberation (Agarwal 1994; Deere and de Leon 2001). However, Ahlers and Zwartveen (2009) argue that because of feminism's inherent "disagreement with the ideological underpinnings of the neoliberal water project, as it does not articulate the wider political, social ecological and gendered dimensions of water and, actually, reproduces gendered biases, creates dangers of alienability of individual water and possibilities for dispossession," there is no feminist potential of neoliberal water reforms (ibid).

Water Privatization

The last three decades have seen a considerable growth in the neoliberalization of nature, with its most drastic shifts occurring in the realm of water governance (see Harris 2009; Goldman 2007). Particularly in the developing world, rapid urbanization and population growth have put city water systems under great institutional and financial pressure. Global financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank have loaned money to these hard-pressed cities, promoting a neoliberal shift which has included devolution of water management to communities and an increased commoditization of water sector and rapid privatization of water service provision (Bakker 2005; Goldman 2007). As a result, in 2000, governments of 93 nations had begun to privatize their drinking water and wastewater services (United Nations Statistics). Although privatized water makes for a relatively small percentage of water provision globally today, in order to exemplify the direct and indirect effects of the neoliberal water project on gender inequality and to refute the notion that it can serve to address gender inequality, this analysis will focus on the privatization of water services described by Harris as the engagement of the private sector in water infrastructure development and service provision.

The rationale behind water privatization is portrayed as purely economic but emerges from a complex urbanization process best explained by Swyngedouw (2004). Analyzing the urbanization process through the lens of urban water circulation and the urban hydrosocial-cycle, the author describes the city as a hybrid where ecological, human and nonhuman, political, and socio-spatial power intersect. Swyngedouw's analysis begins with the invention of the concept of "water circulation" with water following a path into the city, through the plumbing and piping structures that are a city's water infrastructure, and then back out into its natural flow path—Briscoe 2002 makes a similar claim by arguing that water circulation, namely in a straight industrial line, is the modern ideal of progress and that modernity, as our society has conceptualized, dislikes the natural flow of a river and its "inefficient" provision of water to the modern city. It is in this "utopian urban space," Swyngedouw argues, that water enables broader socio-economic, political, and gendered norms to play out, as shown with the birth of sex-specific private/closed bathrooms. Therefore, in the modern urban space, waterworks helped solidify new class and gender differentiations while water became appropriated and used as an integral element of social power—that is, access and control to water equal power (ibid). It is no wonder, then, that the nature-society nexus is most evident when water is used to recreate wider societal inequality, as is the case with privatization.

Given the growing water concerns of today's major cities, in an effort to conserve water, mitigate corruption, and combat inefficiencies in water management, governments are increasingly allowing market forces to privatize water resources. By turning over municipal water systems to the private water corporations, it allows market forces to take

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over and regulate the supply, demand, and price of the resource, which has ecological, social, and, of course, economic benefits. Theoretically speaking, this could give women living in slums and informal settlements much needed water in their own communities and homes, along with ownership of the water for which they would pay an equilibrium price intersected by the quantity demanded and the available supply. However, Bakker and Zwarteveen's key criticism is that this hypothetical scenario does not account for the direct and indirect impacts of water privatization on women's lives and the unequal power dynamics that drive them.

For instance, on the one hand, a direct impact of privatization in a slum or informal settlement in an Indian slum, which this model does not account for, is that while the water may be able to physically reach the slum through the water infrastructure constructed by a private firm, women may still not have the means to purchase it; if they cannot purchase it due to their poverty, then women will still be left without a drop of clean water. Furthermore, women often pay the most for water, as is the case in Kenya where female slum-dwellers pay, at least, five times more for one liter of water than their counterparts in the United States (IISD 2004), and they certainly pay more than their non-slum peers connected to the city supply of water. Hence, without any substitute(s) for water, in such situations women remain without it. What is even worse is that according to the Women's Environment and Development Organization, privatization also results in water cut-offs, deteriorating water quality, health, and sanitation hazards (WEDO).

On the other hand, an indirect impact of this shift to privatized water is that the issue over the lack of water becomes an individual one (Ahlers and Zwarteveen 2011). Regarding the notion that a water "title" could provide women with more security, Ahlers and Zwarteveen state:

Within a neoliberal context that values the individual over the collective and private over public (or usufructory) property, the deadly combination is a title that is (1) divorced from land; (2) alienable; (3) individual; and (4) connotes private property, and thus exempt from public or community scrutiny.

In short, the most important point in this analysis is, perhaps, that privatized water, and other neoliberal-based water reforms, isolate the individual "consumer" from its community and make their issue of water scarcity solely their own while making it possible to blame the individual for this scarcity. Considering the direct impacts of not being able to "buy" or "afford" water, the issue becomes even greater when, not only is a woman unable to buy the resource or provide for this familial responsibility, but that it is her fault, as she is "lazy" or a bad manager of her economic assets. Further, this individualization strips the community of collective interests, and in a way, ensures that collective action against privatization is much more difficult. Of course, many exceptions do come to play, yet women and men are rising against privatization in their communities. Ignoring the social, cultural, and historical dimensions of the women's water struggles is certainly made easier through such "equalizing" measures (ibid)

Conclusion

For cities in the developing world, meeting the basic needs of water supply and sanitation is their most pressing water security issue. It is estimated that by 2030, all developing regions, including Asia and Africa, will have more people living in urban than rural areas (UN Habitat 2010). In Sub-Saharan Africa, 62 percent of the urban population already lives in urban slums (ibid). The effects of climate change are further exacerbating urbanization so that in places like Kenya, it is estimated that 50 percent of the population will live in cities by 2050 (UNEP 2009). What is worse is that we are approaching an impending water crisis, and the issue will only be compounded by other factors, not addressed in this paper, such as global warming, pollution, energy needs, or the differences in water scarcity between the global north and south.

Hopefully, this paper has succeeded in articulating why reductionist neoliberal reforms in the water sector, namely water privatization, do not align with contemporary feminist water agendas, as the former does not address wider political, economic, and historical structures that undermine the rights of women, but rather magnifies and reproduces unequal power dynamics and oppression. This paper also synthesized current literature on the topic nature-society nexus and provided a framework for understanding how water impacts the world's most impoverished group of people—women and girls. Admittedly, contemporary feminist water agendas would urge students, scholars, and practitioners to pay special attention to the complex power dynamics underlying the neoliberalization of natural

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resources (Harris 2009). It is imperative that the debate on these issues continues and that in the search for alternatives to neoliberal reforms in the water sector, a thorough deconstruction of the multiple dimensions of power and oppression is not forgotten. From a feminist political ecology standpoint, it is important to observe that water reforms are not just tacked onto a paper as an afterthought, but that they are a central point of inquiry in any exploration of the direct and indirect effects of new methods of water governance.

Along with the commercialization of water and other natural resources, from Bolivia to Argentina and from France to the United States, luckily groups who are reclaiming the ancestral rights, are learning how to manage the water efficiently, and are rediscovering their ancient covenants with water and Mother Nature are pushing back this trend. In Uruguay, the women-run neighborhood commission of the district of San Antonio successfully lobbied local authorities to maintain the community tap. Now the standpipe in the neighborhood not only supplies water to locals, but also to neighbors from other districts where, because of the inability to pay the high water rates, standpipes have been removed or where household water connections have been cut off (WEDO).

With the growing calls for change, there has been a huge increase in water and development literature that addresses the alternatives to privatization. The Municipal Services Project, for example, which operates under the premise that privatization has failed and is no longer a viable option, conducts research on the following alternatives: public-public partnerships, worker cooperatives, community-owned systems, progressive financing schemes, and rights-based constitutional approaches, among others. In addition, it proposes methods for evaluating their effectiveness and is committed to knowledge-sharing and thoughtful debate that invites all parties concerned with water (practitioners, students, academics, civil society, etc.). This is a great leap forward. Moreover, the UNDP Human Development Report (2006) recommends some of the following measures for enhanced water use: declaring water a human right, establishing national strategies for minimum water and sanitation expenditure, and introducing poverty reduction strategies that prioritize water and sanitation. These are aspirational, of course, but address some of the core issues that states can take to combat water related issues.

However, the whole world must not be left out of the equation and must arm itself with the power that comes from knowing how the current status quo oppresses brothers and sisters around the globe, particularly as it concerns water. Although coming to reduce water consumption, waste, and pollution takes hard sweat and tears, it is up to the average woman and man, in solidarity with fellow women and men who have barely enough water to get them through the day, to first take decisive, informed, and unsensationalist measures. After all, anyone can one day wake up and find his or herself with no water left.

Moreover, as humankind's fate, ultimately, lies not on global markets but on global natural resources, citizens of the world's largest consumers states, namely the developed nations, must protect water and other natural resources rather than economic systems of power. More importantly, considering the frameworks within which this essay analyzed the power dynamics, everyone must examine the ways in which he or she oppresses or exerts power over others. By understanding fundamental truths such as these, everyone can help nurture solidarity among humankind and, hopefully, help it reevaluate its priorities—shifting away from the capitalist consumption model in which all aspire to grab everything in sight, onto aspiring to have only as much as he or she needs to live.

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