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Insights on Gender Dynamics in Transboundary Water Governance

Rozemarijn ter Horst, Margreet Zwarteveen, and Jenniver Sehring

Introduction

Animated by concern about the near absence of women in transboundary water governance, this book has brought together scholars, activists, practitioners, and policymakers to document the extent of this absence, to reflect on its causes and effects, as well as to draw attention to how female practitioners navigate this masculinised field. Attention to questions of gender in transboundary water is relatively new and may need explaining and justification, as the masculinity of transboundary water governance often continues to be taken for granted. It is seen as something that does not need to be noted and opened up for questioning. To date, there have been relatively few studies about the genderedness of transboundary water governance. In Chapter 3 of this book, Priya and Debnath show that none of the 105 articles written on transboundary waters in South Asia from 2000 to 2020 discuss questions of gender. Their finding underscores the conclusion of an earlier study by De Silva et al. (2018) that women as decision makers are generally absent in studies on transboundary water management.

This perhaps is no surprise when looking at the separate scholarly fields that transboundary water governance brings together, international relations (IR), and water resources management, which both are rather masculine fields. Yet, in IR, there is a steadily growing stream of feminist scholarship, with work that sets out to identify, make visible, and challenge gender-based hierarchies and power differences (see e.g. Ackerly et al. 2006; Aggestam & Towns 2019; Enloe 2014; Tickner 2006). Gender also assumes a more prominent and accepted place on foreign policy agendas, with some countries even having adopted explicit feminist foreign policies (like Sweden, Germany). The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (UNSC 2000) may have helped here; it raises the importance of questions of equal participation and full involvement of women in the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. In the field of water, there has been quite some research and policy attention to questions of gender, but this has tended to focus on women as water users and the genderedness of local water management systems, with most work done on the so-called domestic sphere – the

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sphere traditionally associated with women. There is nevertheless a small body of work on the genderedness of water bureaucracies and the water profession (see Chapter 1), while there are also some – often donor-sponsored – initiatives to make the professional water domain more diverse.

This book, then, combines these two fields to expand the exploration of gender dynamics in transboundary water governance. The different chapters examine how water governance is gendered, why this is so, and how it matters for the effectiveness of transboundary water governance processes and outcomes. The book brings together a diverse set of authors who write and analyse differently, each having different assumptions, aims, and ambitions. They also use different methods and theories, with some contributors sharing their experiences and reflections in less theoretical ways. We acknowledge and appreciate this "discursive virtuosity" (Kunz et al. 2019, p. 5), seeing it as itself partly stemming from how and where the different authors are positioned. After all, most of those who study gender in transboundary water governance (including most of the contributors to this volume) are not just concerned about producing more accurate and complete representations, but are also motivated by the desire to transform transboundary organisations, institutions, and processes – making these more hospitable to women, and more attentive to gender or feminist concerns. How to do this effectively partly depends on one's position and action perspective. For instance, for relative outsiders who depend less on the approval and appreciation of those studied, it may be easier to be explicitly critical than for those collaborating with or perhaps even depending on the people they study (see also Resurrección & Elmhirst 2020). Gender or feminist research, in other words, is often contentious and may be met with resistance. Doing it well requires cautious strategy and learning how to deal with backlashes. For instance, about which terms to use (gender, feminist, women?), or which entry points to choose (equity, justice, the effectiveness of negotiations?). In our attempt at synthesising the chapters in this conclusion, we signal some of these differences. Perhaps the most obvious one in terms of positioning is that between those *doing* transboundary water governance – practitioners, those tasked with *supporting* those doing transboundary water governance – often in the context of development cooperation, and those *studying* transboundary water governance.

Seeing Women or Gender in Transboundary Water Governance: Definitions and Framings

Several chapters (3, 4, and 5) in this book try to explain why gender is not more prominently discussed in scholarship on transboundary water governance. Mostly based on critical reviews of the available literature, these chapters show that ontological and epistemological choices or preferences in academic studies importantly co-determine how easily or well gender can be seen in transboundary water governance. Hence, Priya and Debnath, in Chapter 3, first examine whether there is a relation between the gender of

the researcher and the chosen theoretical approach. While they do not find a strong correlation, they do note that most of the articles they reviewed adopt what they call a state-centric approach – which means that the analyses focus on the behaviour of states, rather than on that of individuals – and treat transboundary water governance in a rather technical manner. Transboundary water governance, then, is defined as everything that happens in the public and formal sphere, a definition that is itself based on the assumption that it is possible (and useful) to distinguish between what is public (or formal) and what is private (or informal). When asked, most of those working in water diplomacy or involved in transboundary water organisations will be quick to point out that such a distinction will always be arbitrary. They acknowledge that what happens behind the scenes – in what perhaps are the more informal or private spheres – is as important as what happens in official meetings. Priya and Debnath show that limiting the study of transboundary water governance to what happens in the formal, public sphere also makes gender either disappear or seem irrelevant, as the distinctions between formal and informal or between public and private are often drawn through gendered associations. Hence, when what women do tends to be associated with the private, informal sphere (as often happens), it automatically ceases to matter for the analysis of transboundary water governance. They conclude that "seeing" gender in transboundary water governance requires critically re-thinking ontological categories and definitions.

One effort to do precisely this is presented by Bisht in Chapter 5. Like Priya and Debnath, she takes issue with how dominant approaches to studying transboundary water governance make actors' behaviours disappear – something that also makes it difficult to see and question gender relations. She associates this with a tendency of studies to take scales of governance as a given. Bisht instead proposes an approach that foregrounds the networks through which states, organisations, people, and things are connected. This allows recognising that scales of governance are constructed (also see Norman & Cook 2016); networks are made, re-made, and broken, by a variety of state as well as non-state actors (Hocking 2006). Bisht suggests that a network approach not only allows recognising that diplomacy processes are not always linear, but – by foregrounding processes, actors, and relations – also helps make intersecting relations of caste, class, and gender become more visible (Gillman 2016). To examine gender dynamics in transboundary water governance, it is, therefore, a more useful approach as compared to conventional approaches.

Offutt in Chapter 4 also stresses the need to go beyond the transboundary level and look at different scales in order to fully understand the complexity of gender in water-related conflicts. In her review of the existing literature, she mobilises the four elements of gender proposed by El-Bushra & Sahl (2005) – gender roles, identities, institutions, and ideologies – to reveal how the different studies represent gender in water-related conflicts. She finds that there are few studies that address multiple scales, and that there are distinct ways of

approaching gender at different levels. At the local scale, the analysis shows that women appear mainly as victims of water insecurity. In studies on regional levels, women appear as leaders and participants in revolts. In particular, and confirming the findings of some of the other chapters, she notes that women and gender are absent in the academic literature on water conflicts at the transboundary level.

Empowering Women or Mainstreaming Gender in Transboundary Water Governance

Some chapters (6 and 7) present and reflect on systematic efforts to mainstream gender in transboundary organisations, decision-making spaces, and processes. Hence, Hagerman et al. in Chapter 6, examine how gender policies were developed within the context of the Nile Basin Initiative and the Nile Basin Discourse, a donor-funded project in which the authors were involved. Von Lossow, in Chapter 7, discusses gender-related policies in five different river basins – the Nile, Jordan, Zambesi, Indus, and Danube. Based on a review of both academic literature and policy documents, he compares policies concerning gender with implementation on the ground. The planned efforts that both chapters describe as part of gender mainstreaming are long-ranging, from support for women interested in entering the masculine spaces of transboundary water governance by building their leadership skills, to making transboundary water governance more hospitable to women. Doing this, as Hagerman et al. show when discussing the need for (and challenges of) a transformative approach, entails more than just bringing in more women: it also requires changing the spaces in terms of how they are organised and what is discussed, the norms of engaging and behaving, and how authority and expertise are defined and valued. Both chapters are energised by the hope that increasing the number of female leaders and decision makers will contribute to wider feminist transformations in society, beyond positive change in transboundary water governance.

The chapters also invite reflection on how those engaged in gender mainstreaming strategise to make the topic of gender in a transboundary water context more widely accepted. After all, and as some of the other chapters show, many of the men and women working in transboundary water governance do not readily see or admit that they work in a deeply gendered environment. This means that those tasked with gender mainstreaming risk being dismissed, ignored, criticised, or ridiculed. Worse still, those doing gender work may be resisted because they are perceived as challenging hegemonic norms and values (Kunz et al. 2019). Wielding the financial, political, and institutional support needed to effectuate real change, therefore, is a careful balancing act between continuing to be accepted by the representatives and supporters of the status quo, while at the same time nudging them towards adopting different behaviours, policies, and programmes.

Gendered Dynamics in Transboundary Water Institutions and Processes

The book contains three chapters (8, 9, and 10) that provide a more in-depth investigation of the genderedness of transboundary water governance institutions and processes, by zooming in on what happens in specific river basins: the Nile, the Chu–Talas, and the Rhine. Through interviews and observations, the authors of these chapters try to lay bare how gendered norms and values legitimise often unequal distributions of income, resources, labour, and power (among others) between men and women. They also focus on what happens during the interactions between men and women during negotiations, as this is where differences and possible hierarchies become visible. Hence, in Chapter 8, Sehring studies gender dynamics in the Chu–Talas Commission (CTC) that facilitates water cooperation between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan focusing on three sets of practices: duty travels, leadership norms, and negotiation styles. She mobilises theoretical insights from Feminist Institutionalism to help identify how "constructions of masculinity and femininity are intertwined in the daily life or logic of political institutions" (Mackay et al. 2010, p. 580). This happens, for instance, through how boundaries between the "formal" and the "informal" are mapped onto what is considered as "masculine" and "feminine" to create a partly implicit hierarchy of appreciation that makes it easier for men to be seen as performing well than for women. Sehring borrows the notion of a "gendered logic of appropriateness" (Chappell 2006, p. 223) to identify the resulting "acceptable" masculine and feminine forms of behaviour.

In Chapter 9 on the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine (ICPR), Mattur and ter Horst's analysis starts from the premise that organisational structures are not gender neutral. They mobilise Acker's (1990, 1992) feminist theory of organisations and the four substructures identified as producing and perpetuating gendered assumptions and power relations: organising processes, organisational culture, interactions on the job, and gendered identities (Acker 2012). In this chapter, interviewees tell the story of the ICPR as one that gradually became more hospitable to women resulting in similar numbers of woman and men, something they attribute to a gradual broadening of the field of water management. In particular, the involvement of biologists and geographers – fields that are much less strictly defined in masculine terms and that are traditionally less dominated by men as compared to hydrology and engineering – made it easier for women to enter the field. Yet, during the interviews it became clear that a masculine legacy – ideas, values, and principles – continues to shape and colour how water governance is done. This is most clearly shown in the different answers men and women gave when asked about how they behaved to be (seen as) professional. Most women were able to pinpoint how they adjust their behaviour in this respect, while most men emphasised that interactions in ICPR were gender neutral.

In Chapter 10, Said shows how the barriers for women to reaching decision-making positions in transboundary governance institutions of the Nile are deeply

embedded in cultural norms and related gender roles. The effect is that only a few women are represented in transboundary negotiations. Interestingly, both male and female interviewees stated (experienced as well as expected) positive effects of more gender-balanced teams for negotiation dynamics, sometimes paired with rather essentialist and positive assumptions about female leadership styles. Finally, Said reflects on what could help to overcome those barriers. Rather, or more, than capacity development for women advocated by some studies and programmes, she emphasises increased awareness and mentorship of male colleagues. This aligns with the transformative approach promoted by Hagerman et al. in Chapter 6.

These three chapters show that gender differences and inequalities do not always manifest as outright discrimination, statistics, or legal barriers. On the surface, both the CTC and the ICPR appear to be gender-equal organisations. Yet, when digging a bit deeper, it is possible to discern how more or less institutionalised and seemingly gender-neutral ways of appreciating and valuing behaviours – as seen in definitions of "good professionalism" or "leadership", for instance – continue to be gendered, making it easier for some (conforming men) to be seen as successful than for others (women and men who display less conforming behaviour). Becoming aware of and noticing these more invisible norms and definitions is challenging, as they are often part of what is considered normal and form part of deeply engrained routines. Indeed, "silence on gender is a determining characteristic of institutions of hegemonic masculinity" (Kronsell 2006, p. 109) and makes researching those institutions challenging.

In CTC, for example, the female committee members interviewed were cautiously reluctant to explain their professional achievements and career trajectories by referring to gender. They instead preferred to highlight their expertise, underscoring that they are and can perform as competently as their male colleagues. In general, there was little enthusiasm for naming and discussing, let alone openly challenging, gender hierarchies. Yet, the fact that many interviewees referred to Soviet times as a period during which professional relations were more equal than nowadays suggests that they do have an opinion about gender in relation to their present working experiences. In practical work, they seem to consider efforts to blend in by acting and performing as men do a safer and more successful strategy to be (seen as) a competent professional. Also in ICPR, one interviewee mentioned explicit efforts to adjust her behaviour as a way to become more accepted. She even took acting classes to learn how to negotiate in a more masculine way.

Researching gendered institutions is challenging, too, because researchers themselves are gendered human beings. Their own internalised ideas about what is normal, appropriate, or desirable in terms of gender will make it easier for them to notice some dynamics more easily than others. Mattur reflects on this in Chapter 9. She creatively mobilises the fact that she was born and raised in India to question what the interviewees from Western Europe considered as normal. Contrasting what they told her with what she knew about her own country yielded interesting conversations that helped bring into relief

and make explicit gendered norms of both interviewer and interviewees. The explicit and conscious use of feminist theories is likewise useful in helping make internalised assumptions as explicit as possible, opening them up for questioning.

A related challenge has to do with the tendency (of both researcher and researched) to essentialise gender differences. In the Nile, Chu–Talas, and Rhine basins, interviewees (both men and women) believed that the presence of women in meetings and negotiations encouraged men to behave more collaboratively and politely, making them avoid rude language and harsh tones. Female interviewees in all three basins also thought that women were better negotiators, as (according to them) women are better listeners than their male counterparts. These similarities across basins seem to originate in more globalised notions of gender difference, such as that women are more caring for the environment, less self-interested, and more eager to find and accept compromises. Confrontation, dominance, competition, and war are instead more associated with men. Similar gendered dichotomies also underpin the distinction between more masculine and competitive and more feminine and caring bargaining styles. Referring to such rather stereotypical ideas about male–female differences to make sense of own and others' experiences does not just underscore their persistence, but may also recursively reproduce them and make them "real" (see also Maoz 2009; Naurin et al. 2019). Researchers must remain cautious about the origins and effects of their frames of interpretation and analysis: do these reify and strengthen prevailing stereotypes, or do they instead help question and widen definitions of what being a "good" water diplomat means? Complementing interviews with direct ethnographic observations is one good strategy to avoid the convenient and rapid reproduction of stereotypes; it allows cross-checking and combining what people say (about what they think and do) with what they actually do. Sehring's analysis in Chapter 8 became, for instance, much richer because she was able to participate in several CTC meetings. Engaging in more ethnographic kinds of observations may not always be possible in a transboundary water context, however. Especially when the stakes of negotiations are high, outside researchers are unlikely to be invited in.

Women Navigating a Masculine and White World

Finally, two chapters (2 and 11) zoom in on the experiences of women diplomats and practitioners working in transboundary governance. Chapter 2 presents an interview with Mariana Yumbay Yallico, conducted and transcribed by Diego Jara. Yumbay Yallico works on transboundary water governance in Ecuador in her capacity as judge in the National Court of Justice of Ecuador. She challenges the prevailing transboundary water culture and norms because she is a woman, but also because she is an indigenous person. In addition to dealing with and navigating gender-based challenges, she therefore also has to confront ethnical, cultural, and racial prejudices. In the

chapter, she explains that these do not just have to do with how she is seen and treated as a person, but also importantly relate to how transboundary waters are defined and dealt with. According to the Kichwa community that she belongs to, it makes no sense to talk about national borders when dealing with rivers. In Kichwa cosmology, rivers or waters cannot be "owned" or "shared", but people live with rivers and rivers live with people in a reciprocal relation of care. Yumbay Yallico believes that creating legal and political space for this indigenous way of relating to rivers is important because of how it recognises and respects the ways of being of indigenous communities as well as how they are impacted by current ways of governing transboundary rivers. The indigenous way comes with much greater appreciation for the inherent value of rivers, which may provide an important inspiration for re-conceptualising society–river relations. Her hope is that it also contributes to reducing gender inequities, a hope that is inspired by what is known about pre-Inca indigenous societies that were more harmonious in terms of gender.

Chapter 11 by ter Horst et al. makes female water diplomats visible through interviews with five renowned women working in transboundary water governance. Although coming from and working in distinctly different contexts, they all felt that they had to adapt their behaviour to be or become accepted in the masculine world of transboundary water governance. In order to be effective and successful, several of the interviewees shared the feeling that they often have to work harder. For instance, Maria Amakali from Namibia notes how she, in contrast to her male colleagues, has to actively organise and arrange her paid work with the work that needs to be done at home. Some also said that they have to be particularly persistent to be heard, oftentimes relating this to the existence of a tacit knowledge hierarchy based on the intersection of discipline and gender. Hydrologists and engineers are considered more important and knowledgeable than biologists, lawyers, or geographers, and men are deemed more important than women. In this context, several women experience that some men react to the fact that they are a woman by explaining how hydrology works, assuming they lack technical knowledge. Others have more positive experiences. Anamika Barua, for example, shares that in the South Asian context, her work as facilitator of the Brahmaputra Dialogue is especially valued due to essentialised ideas about how women are better listeners, rather than her personal merits. Nadia Gefoun from Sudan equally feels taken seriously and valued for her contributions as an experienced diplomat. She relates this amongst others to the position of women in Sudanese society, reflecting on the key role of women in the revolution of 2018–19.

Despite many similarities between the stories of the women interviewed, it is also clear that gender plays out very differently depending on country, institutional platform, and moments in time. Heide Jekel was well placed to note this, as she has been working in six River Basin Organisations (RBOs) with different member countries and adjusts her behaviour respectively.

Conclusion

The case studies and analyses presented in this book show different dimensions of gender dynamics in transboundary waters, as well as different approaches for studying them. The chapters provide important starting points for exposing the genderedness of transboundary water governance and suggest possible ways to open up the field to women (and other "others") and to understand and address gender concerns. As such, the book sketches the contours of an emerging feminist engagement with transboundary governance, one aimed at creating the analytical and political space to question the "normalcy" of transboundary water governance practices, structures, and outcomes. The book suggests that this evolving feminist project in transboundary water governance consists of at least three sub-projects.

A first sub-project consists of identifying and exposing how gendered norms, values, emotions, and knowledges shape transboundary water governance realities. This can be done by carefully listening to the experiences and stories of women who operate as water diplomats and members of transboundary RBOs, zooming in on how they navigate and deal with the gendered mechanisms and structures that characterise the field. It can also be done by uncovering how institutionalised ideas about what it means to be a "good" professional, and notions about what it means to be a "real" man or woman, making professional competence seem more "natural" for some than for others. Detecting how deeply held gender norms and values shape transboundary water governance is an important first step in questioning them. It provides room for making such norms and the practices that they support more explicit, which is a good basis for experimenting with other ways of organising and valuing work and competencies.

A second sub-project consists of engaging with and learning from efforts to mainstream gender in transboundary water governance; creating more space for women or gender concerns in transboundary water platforms and programmes. Such efforts teeter on a thin line, trying to improve the possibilities to recognise women's needs and gender concerns without losing credibility or upsetting those that represent the status quo. As several chapters have shown, transboundary water governance is closely embedded and shaped by the broader structural, political, and cultural contexts and their gender relations, which limits how much change can be achieved within transboundary water institutions. On the one hand, remaining too faithful to preferred ways of doing things runs the risk of continuing to remain caught in and further reproducing the very gendered (sub)structures that cause discrimination against women and marginalisation of gender in the first place. On the other hand, a complete disengagement from existing languages and professional cultures risks having little convincing force towards those with the powers and resources to help make the needed changes.

A third sub-project, then, is concerned with finding new ways of thinking about, defining, and representing (framing, theorising) transboundary water governance that are better suited for articulating gender and feminist

concerns. This sub-project, in a way, follows on and complements the first two sub-projects in that it starts from the realisation that existing ways of doing and talking (or thinking) about transboundary water governance devalorise or invisibilise women's contributions or make gender concerns seem irrelevant. In prevailing ways of making sense of transboundary water realities, both in scholarly and policy texts, gender does not belong to what needs to be explained but rather tends to be taken for granted or is defined away. State-centric approaches notably make it difficult to "see" gender. At an even deeper level, questioning gender within transboundary water governance is difficult because existing ways of thinking, speaking, and writing about it make use of the very gendered binary distinctions – between emotion and reason, formal and informal, private and public, aggression and friendliness – that underpin and justify institutionalised forms of difference and hierarchy. In this endeavour, there is room for deeper engagement with feminist theoretical and methodological approaches in IR and diplomacy studies, as well as work on gender and water management and engineering. Some chapters in this volume touched upon these, but a more explicit application of these to transboundary water governance promises avenues for theorising it from a gender perspective.

In sum, feminist engagement with transboundary water governance does not stop at including women in existing organisations, enhancing their participation in current processes, and/or inserting gender concerns in already established agendas. It is also about questioning these organisations, processes, and agendas from a feminist perspective, disentangling how procedures, rules of engagement, and framings are themselves masculinist or exclusionary, and learning how these play out very differently in different contexts. Based on this, feminist engagements contribute to identifying avenues for overcoming inequalities and achieving truly inclusive and equitable governance arrangements for transboundary waters.

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