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9 | GENDER EQUITY, CITIZENSHIP AND PUBLIC WATER IN BANGLADESH

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Over the past 30 years, the international community has affirmed and reaffirmed water as a human right, but nearly one billion people continue to suffer the health, development and social consequences of the lack of safe, affordable water (Sultana and Loftus 2012). Increasingly, the commercialization of water services is resulting in conflicts and calls for alternatives to privatization and for making water public (McDonald and Ruiters 2012; McGranahan and Owen 2006; Rakodi 2000).

Attention to gender has been identified as a significant lacuna in the broader literature on water governance and alternatives to privatization (Cleaver and Hamada 2010; O'Reilly et al. 2009; Truelove 2011). This chapter focuses on the gendered nature and importance of public water and the process of (re)publicization. It looks at the use, access and management of water, and promotes a historicized and politicized understanding of water struggles. We map and contextualize the gender–water relations in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and discuss the historically situated constraints and possibilities surrounding water governance, and outline the beginnings of a broader conceptual framework for socially just and equitable water systems that are responsive to women's needs and interests and conducive to the emergence of a politicized sense of self and autonomy.

While this research is primarily motivated by a commitment to gender-water equity, it should not be understood as a plea for attention to women's water needs as additional or extraneous to a more generalized set of needs. To be certain, a gender-equitable system of water provision would not eschew generalization; rather, it requires that we, as theorists and/or practitioners, commit to examinations that are accountable to history and that maintain a flexible relationship to the realities of social life (Mohanty 2003). To that end this study affirms equity, affordability, sustainability and efficiency as generally desirable

aspects of public water provision, but questions the means of creating and evaluating public systems to achieve these goals, and warns against entrenching local power hierarchies or further marginalizing the poor or exacerbating their exploitation. Poor women are not a separate interest group outside of the generalized body of water users or consumers. To the contrary, 'the particular standpoint of poor indigenous and Third World/South women provides the most inclusive viewing of systemic power' (Mohanty 2003, 232). Our investigation of the Korail slum, the largest informal settlement in Dhaka, highlights the ways that public water is imagined, experienced and desired. The study reveals a strong preference among women surveyed for public water, which is shaped by affordability, a desire for full citizenship and legal standing, and a hope for water justice and equity not offered by the public–private water delivery mix currently operating in the city.

The field research that informs this chapter was guided by a feminist ethnographic methodology, which gives careful attention to diverse experiences and voices by heeding the constraints, opportunities and challenges in women's lives, and which looks for thick description, specific data and stories that are profoundly gendered and context relevant (Kabeer 1994). Extensive field research involved semi-structured interviews with men and women, case studies, focus group discussions, key informant interviews and participant observation between 2010 and 2012. We created a space for women in Korail to talk about their lived experiences, individually and collectively, because these are what gives rise to preferences for public versus private water, and people's perception of the state and other development actors. Key gendered differences in experiences with water came to light because women are the primary managers of water in the home, and their labour, time and livelihoods are significantly impacted by the lack of safe water. We were particularly interested in eliciting stories and responses that shed light on gender–water realities and the local power hierarchies that complicate a simplistic focus on gender as a male–female binary. Centring gender in research practice brings women's demands into view in a nuanced manner and with greater accountability than relying on conventional notions of gendered water needs. In addition, it was essential to carry out an intersectional analysis of gendered inequalities, juxtaposing the class- and gender-based experiences of women. Intersectionality permits analysing the mutual construction and interlocking nature of oppression and requires a methodology that

is attentive to differences among women (Crenshaw 1991; Hill-Collins 1998).

By unearthing women's experiences and opinions in relation to men, we find that relationships at multiple levels of social life impact their access to water. We learn that the lack of water not only increases their physical workloads, but also deepens their emotional strain and reduces their wellbeing. We learn that decision making is only empowering when the inequalities between women are accounted for and represented. We learn that public water is desired by women because they believe it holds the promise of access for all and would be a first step toward their recognition as citizens of this burgeoning city. In sum, we learn that building structures and systems that take seriously the needs and wants of those most marginalized would improve equity, quality, participation, efficiency, transparency and accountability in water service systems overall.

On water's edge: The lived experiences in Korail slum

Whereas responsibility for the planning, construction and modernization of water supply and sanitation typically resides with the national government's Department of Public Health Engineering, the capital Dhaka and Chittagong (the second-largest city) are treated as exceptions. As rapidly growing urban areas, public managers opted for local systems of water service provision believing a decentralized structure would be better suited to keeping pace with change.

The Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (DWASA) was formed in 1963 (Haq 2006). Organizationally, DWASA is divided into 11 operational zones that are each managed locally by individual WASAs (Hoque 2003). The mission of DWASA as a whole is to 'provide potable water and sanitation services to the city dwellers at an affordable price' with the goals of '100% water supply coverage by the year 2005 and 80% sanitation coverage by 2020' (Haq 2006, 295), both of which remain unmet.

The seemingly progressive and banal pledge to provide coverage for Dhaka's 'city dwellers' is, in fact, an administrative façade. In reality, to be counted as a city dweller, one must first be counted as a landowner or legal tenant. Dhaka's informal population, estimated at approximately 3.5 million people out of a total population of 17 million, does not hold legal tenure rights and therefore does not have access or legal claim to the municipal water and sanitation system,

rendering this population administratively invisible in routine water policy and planning. As illegal squatters, these Dhaka 'city dwellers' are effectively erased and excluded.

If water is a basic right conferred to citizens, which Bangladesh affirmed when it adopted the UN resolution on access to water as a human right, then denying access to public municipal water is a denial of the full rights of citizenship. In the process, Korail slum dwellers are positioned as quasi-citizens, bringing into sharp relief the material implications of informality as a social and political identity, and indeed that of the very notion of 'public' services.

Conventional development theory suggests informality is an undesirable consequence of urbanization, and contrary to state goals and ambitions (Kudva 2009; Parnell and Pieterse 2010). These arguments belie an economic reality; informality subsidizes urban development. To this end, Roy (2005, 148) employs the term *urban informality* 'to indicate an organizing logic, a system of norms that governs the process of urban transformation itself'. The 'illegitimacy' of the slum is therefore not solely a political liability; it also serves a variety of political and economic purposes, much like undocumented labour fills particular economic, social and political needs in many countries in the global North. Thus the labour of Korail residents constitutes a significant share of the 'critical infrastructure' of Dhaka's urban development (Zukin 2010). Informality, as a strategy of development, asserts control over a body politic by usurping control of individual bodies; in this case, the illegality of living in the slum constrains social mobility as well as the political and economic participation of its inhabitants in the broader public life of the city.

Korail slum is located in the wealthiest part of Dhaka city, the upper-class neighbourhoods of Banani and Gulshan, and is built on land adjacent to Gulshan Lake andextending onto it through illegal landfill. Situated on approximately 90 acres of land owned by three government agencies, it is one of the largest slums in Dhaka (Angeles et al. 2009). Korail first emerged during the 1990s in response to the growing needs of an internal migrant population whose homes and land were expropriated or whose means of survival had been made obsolete by trade liberalization, riverbank erosion, and a host of other causes. To meet the new demand for city housing, unscrupulous and enterprising groups 'illegally captured' available land and extended their rentals through the landfill of Gulshan Lake (Mridha et al. 2009,

12). The slum population has grown to roughly 16,000 families making up a population of more than 100,000 people who have lived in the slum for an average of 15 years (DSK 2010).

Lower costs of living compared to other slums and close proximity to places of work make Korail an appealing option for the urban poor. Most Korail residents work as day labourers, rickshaw pullers, garments workers, maids, shopkeepers, drivers, hawkers, vendors, and other informal jobs. Monthly earnings range from BDT 4,000 to 12,000 (US$50–150),[1] a wage that does little to mitigate conditions of poverty (DSK 2010). While their labour generates profit for the state and subsidizes the costs of living for the middle and upper classes, Korail residents are systematically deprived of the basic necessities of life. As one Korail respondent notes: 'The inhabitants of the Korail slum do not get basic needs met, we are treated as animals with the constant threat of eviction ... Rich people are dependent on us in every phase of their life, yet they think about development without the poor people! … They need us, but do not care about us.' In these ways, the social, economic and political costs of informality are borne by the residents of Korail despite their contributions to urban development.

Korail water struggles: Gender and class matter

Because the task of procuring water is primarily borne by women, the conditions of scarcity and burdens of informality intensify the struggle they face in their everyday lives, as is noted in the following exchange regarding water procurement: 'Supplied water comes at night, at 3am. Our schedules and lives are disturbed for water.' A gendered division of labour in the household, patriarchal community structures, and the lack of political representation limit women's access to water and their meaningful participation in decision making around water. The physical and emotional costs of obtaining water constituted a tax on women's time, labour and emotional well-being, and reflect a systematic disregard for the life and health of the slum population (Crow and McPike 2009; Hanchette et al. 2003).

Gendered relations mediate the ways that women and men access and use water, and decisions that affect women's everyday lives are typically made by men, as is highlighted in this simple, yet revealing comment from a young female respondent: 'Men are water businessmen here. Women do not do business.' In lieu of legal and formal access, Korail residents obtained water informally and illegally from water

vendors (water businessmen), who tapped water from public municipal supplies and resold it to the slum dwellers at considerably higher prices. Issues of access are gendered matters in that decision making over cost, quantity and the location of water delivery are generally negotiated in the absence of women. The male head of household negotiated cost and quantity with the landlord who, in turn, contracted with the water vendor for a bulk rate. The fee for water is included in the monthly rental fee and is based on the quantity of water generally specified by the male head of household. Informal access thus excluded women from actively participating in negotiations over quantity and cost; women engaged in the process of accessing water as collectors and users of water. As one woman noted: 'In the morning men go to work so they have no time and don't help us. We have to find out and manage water every day. We have to solve the problem of water for our families. And we have to deal with whatever the problems are.' While men also worry about water, they do not participate in the daily work associated with managing water in the home.

The problems involved with accessing an informal supply of water for an illegally placed household exacerbated the physical and emotional costs of women's work, bounded by normative assumptions around the gendered division of domestic labour which typically equates 'water work with women's work' (O'Reilly 2006). Water-related tasks include household cleaning, cooking and caring for children, the sick and the elderly, each of which are naturalized as women's work. Unlike upper- and middle-class women who have access to a regular supply of municipal water piped into their homes, and often have female domestic workers who do domestic chores, women in Korail have dealt with a chronic, irregular or contaminated water supply on their own. There was nowhere for them to voice complaints or concerns. As one respondent noted: 'If there is a problem with supply or dirty water, complain to whom? We live here illegally.' Similarly, women were expected to manage the consequences of contamination from leaky pipes: 'Dirty water comes inside pipes due to leakage. We are attacked by various diseases like diarrhea and dysentery.' The costs associated with sickness and diseases are routinely borne by women who, in addition to being primarily responsible for water collection and management in the home, are also expected to care for sick family members. The frequent need to boil or treat contaminated water also incurs additional costs.

Much attention has been paid to the monetary and physical costs of water provision, but far less has been paid to the emotional costs that women bear. As the primary procurers of water, women's identities are linked to their ability to provide sufficient quantities of good quality water (Sultana 2009a). The challenges associated with procuring water are often humiliating and demoralizing, and the inability to procure an adequate supply of water is internalized as a failure to properly care for the home and family (Sultana 2011). Women also deal with the emotional costs of reconciling the tensions that arise in relation to cleanliness and sanitary needs, gendered expectations for modesty, and conditions of chronic water scarcity. While men can freely bathe in Gulshan Lake or another public water point, women do not enjoy the same freedom. They are constrained by domestic responsibilities in the slum and normative proscriptions of socially appropriate feminine behaviour that often prohibit them from bathing in open public spaces. Women in Korail stated that they sometimes had to go without bathing or have insufficient water for sanitation, an added suffering in a culture that places importance not only on personal hygiene and cleanliness but which also values water for religious ablution and spiritual purification. This is a gendered struggle particularly during hot summer months when city-wide water shortages mean that Korail gets no fresh water for days on end.

The intersectionality of gender and class is poignant in demonstrating the difference that social location can make in urban water politics. The following response from an older male is indicative of the class and gender tensions: 'Rich/established neighbours get more water as they pay more … Those women do not need to be involved in water collection the way our women do, or labour to fetch water the way our women do.' The entanglement of class and status resulted in more work for poor women, an asymmetrical disregard for poor women's health, and a generalized denial of femininity for poor women versus the hyper-valuation of an 'ideal femininity' for wealthier women (who are seen as 'good' wives and mothers who can provide safe clean water for their families).

Although patriarchal norms affect women across class boundaries, wealthier women are not affected by water scarcity and do not have to worry about water in the same way as poor women do. One woman respondent articulated the class dimensions of access in this way: 'Women of Gulshan/Banani get water as much as they want. They just

open the tap and get water.' Wealthier neighbourhoods can use water for non-survival activities such as watering their lawns, washing their cars and filling up their swimming pools while slum residents struggled for, and rarely obtained, an adequate supply of water to meet their daily needs. These vast inequalities were not lost on the women and men who live in the slum. As one man interviewed for this research noted: 'They have personal water supplies so there is no comparison with them. When they stop using water then our women get water here. Sometimes their water spills over from the [overhead water] tank and they don't even care.' Uneven access to public municipal water radically differentiated the lives of wealthy and poor women.

The importance of being public

In the Korail context, concepts of public and private service delivery can be a murky, misunderstood and inadequate dichotomy. Public provision is complicated by the presence of other actors, such as private vendors, privately owned and operated water systems, as well as NGOs, which blur the lines because they operate public systems that are funded by the private sector or development agencies. That DWASA continues to undergo a process of corporatization – the integration of private regulatory processes, commercialized cost accounting and collection procedures – rather than becoming fully privatized (see Bakker 2011; Budds and McGranahan 2003) further complicates the public–private binary. Compounding this difficult distinction is the fact that the majority of respondents have little to no direct personal experience with either system of provision. Korail residents largely come from rural areas that are not serviced by municipal pipes.

But despite the lack of first-hand experience with a public or private system of provision, a broad consensus emerged in our interviews with residents of Korail: the majority strongly favoured public service provision. Voicing the perceived cost and equity benefits of municipal water, one respondent summed up these sentiments: 'We want DWASA water from the government and everyone should get it. We would then drink the water and pay the bills regularly.'

The reliability, cost, efficiency and equity gains attributed to public systems have the potential to buffer the hard realities that women faced individually and collectively, and are thus regarded as better suited to meet the needs of all users including those left out by private schemes. While cost and affordability were primary concerns, equity was almost

equally cited. The majority of respondents felt that a public system of provision would be more affordable and thus more accessible for the urban poor. Women also thought that the time and energy gains achieved through regular and legal access to municipal water would lift the daily burden of water collection and allow them to pursue new social and economic activities. One woman lamented that she was unable to open a tea stand; for many others, the endless search for water frustrated any efforts at securing additional income for the home. In addition, access to municipal water was often equated with gaining a modicum of citizenship rights and directly related to a vision of water justice. This vision is about access to clean and safe water for all, active participation in decision making, opportunities for betterment, and the elimination of class-based inequalities affecting women's lives in particular.

The preference for public options does not imply giving *carte blanche* to the state, but rather calls for an accountable government that looks after *all* its citizens. The material experiences of the lack of water and people's perceptions of what the state's role should be underlie the claims that Korail residents made on public water. Thus, the desire for public water is wrapped up with notions of citizenship as much as it is seen as an avenue to alleviate daily – and highly gendered – suffering. The desire to be connected to DWASA water was almost universal, as captured in this statement and echoed by several respondents: 'We want water with a low price from the government as we can't buy water with a high price. We are poor. We want freedom from dirty water of the lake and the drains. We want regularly supplied water in every household from DWASA.' As these responses suggest, the majority of respondents believed the government has a role to play in subsidizing the costs of water, and associate paying for water with a vision of responsible citizenship.

Knowing all too well how they are regarded, Korail residents want to become bill-paying citizens like their wealthy neighbours. Willingness to pay, however, does not signify an endorsement of commodification; it represents an eagerness to be granted the same rights and obligations enjoyed by Dhaka's wealthy citizens. In other words, respondents do not actively champion the neoliberal project that equates citizens with consumers and predicates citizenship on an ability to pay. Instead, the desire to pay echoes broader concerns with the prejudices they face as perceived 'freeloaders' in a society that views slums in a harsh

light (see Jones 2011). Slum residents want to engage in the system as consumers, even if it is with token amounts in highly subsidized schemes, because being on the formal water network grants legitimacy. As one man stated: 'We don't want pity water or illegal water. We want a proper water system. We don't want anything for free.'

Citizenship, legality and water justice

Formally conceived, citizenship is a contract between the state and its people. The state secures and promotes individual rights and protections while individuals are bound to the obligations and duties outlined in law and policy. In practice, citizenship is a means of determining who belongs to a state and who does not; it is about inclusion and exclusion (Yuval-Davis 2012). The refusal to grant Korail families access to municipal water was experienced as a denial of belonging and citizenship, as is noted in this response: 'We are not seen as citizens of the country.' The desire for access to water reflected the hope to be granted permanency and legality as residents of the city and to be recognized in policy and law. For the slum residents, the provision of legal and regular access would attenuate the power inequalities that position the urban poor as undeserving. Though formally entitled to water as a basic human right, the illegality of the slum prevented Korail residents from claiming and exercising that right.

At the same time because of the enormous and regular costs of obtaining water through private water vendors, some respondents felt that their obligations were already fulfilled: 'We are not illegal. We spent more money to bring water so why [is it] illegal? We ensure payment regularly.' In part, this reflects a misunderstanding of the means of access, but it also serves as a critique of the exploitative nature of the water vendors. Several respondents also expressed frustration at being socially castigated for making use of a service that they desperately needed and was not otherwise available: 'We are not thieves, but since we are getting and paying for stolen water, so we are thieves by default. We don't want that.' The majority of respondents were, in fact, adamant about their desire to have formal access to municipal water and were clearly prepared to pay for access: 'If the government provides connections for piped water, that would be very beneficial for us. They should give us meters and connections as in other areas.' For most residents, there was tremendous frustration with the existing system. They were cast as social deviants without regard for circumstance,

while they would much prefer access to the municipal system legally if it were available to them.

While government authorities view slum residents as lost profit potential, they also fear the political ramifications of granting permanent access to the municipal water supply. Attempts to legalize slum access were started in the Low Income Community (LIC) scheme of the 1996 DWASA charter. The LIC called for providing water services to slums via the official registration of their community-based organizations (CBOs). Under this scheme, leading Bangladesh NGO Dushtha Shasthya Kendra (DSK) worked to assist Korail residents in their efforts to lobby for communal water points connected to the existing municipal system (Ahmed and Terry 2003). In 2010, after many years of effort, DSK helped Korail negotiate the installation of a DWASA pipeline in the slum.

Although the infrastructure to carry water was in place, the political will necessary to make the water flow remained absent for several years. Considerable resistance from a range of groups – illegal water vendors and lower-level DWASA officials working with them, political opportunists, nearby wealthy communities – blocked the implementation as planned. The prolonged difficulties and challenges in accessing water under the LIC programme furthered the sense that people in the slum were not regarded as equal citizens and they blamed government for the lack of political will: 'We vote for the government for our betterment, but they do not help us.' The prioritization of wealthy residents when it comes to water supply illustrates the class-based exclusions embedded in citizenship. While Dhaka's wealthy residents are able to make demands to the state, this right is routinely denied to the people in slums.

DWASA officials interviewed noted the complexities and challenges of managing escalating demand for water in informal settlements, but also recognize the fiscal motivation to do so. By legalizing water lines with meters and formal payment schemes DWASA could capture much of the revenue lost to illegal water vendors. This motivation was not lost on Korail residents: 'I would prefer to have a legal water supply system. Why should the mediators reap profits from the illegal water supply? If anyone should profit, then it should be the government.' Additionally, DWASA officials cited various health concerns associated with illegal access points; these points are not regulated or monitored by official agencies and become contamination sites that jeopardize the

health and safety of the water infrastructure system as a whole. In sum, extending water coverage would have simultaneously addressed public health concerns and boost revenue collection efforts for DWASA, but the politics and optics of the slum hindered any real progress for a long time.

For the women and men in the Korail slum, the struggle for access to clean water has been a politicizing and mobilizing force through which women have developed a sense of agency and identified strategic interests. Their words, their needs, their struggles and their collective calls for action redefine gendered citizenship. For the women in Korail, citizenship is not solely about rights and belonging; it is about self-determination and portends a life free from the dehumanizing emotional and physical toil associated with meeting the basic need for water.

The preference for municipal water was imbued with the tensions associated with access, gender and citizenship, and municipal access was regarded as a key factor in mediating this. The views articulated by the respondents in Korail begin to weave together a narrative of water justice and an ethic of collective need. The alternative they envisioned would prioritize affordability, sustainability, and would take the form of a legal and formalized public water system. However, they recognized that a formal system required large infrastructure work and networks of pipes and meters that bear costs too high for slum residents on their own. Thus they invoked the state and called upon it to perform its duties to all its citizens.

Conclusions

Water access demands are centrally about making public water available to all – not quasi-legal and informal means of water access but rather publicly provided services, accounted for and democratically allocated. Given the necessity of water, and the gendered nature of water access, provisioning and struggles, making water public thus has gendered implications. The gendered nature of both mental and physical aspects of such struggles cannot be ignored. Having water that is accessible, affordable, reliable and equitable are the hallmarks of what poor women want in their demands for public water services. These aspects are also foundational to the human right to water that exists in policy prescriptions. Making water public is thus important to gender equity and empowerment, and gestures toward more equitable water justice in the urban sphere.

While all slum residents want to be recognized as citizens, understanding the gender-water inequalities embedded in notions of citizenship unlocks very different experiences. Women are not a homogenous group and their needs are not solely determined by their sex because gender is mediated by class in the same way as access to water is. Wealthy women have formal access to water, which shows they are valued by the state; in contrast, poor women are constrained by illegality and water scarcity. Such class inequalities shape women's lives in extreme ways: well-off women can use water for a variety of basic needs (drinking, cooking, bathing, cleaning, etc.) and leisure activities (gardening, swimming, etc.), while women in the slums struggle to find basic amounts of water to survive on. Looking at the intersectionalities of gender and class and the resulting inequities thus becomes central to understanding broader power relations that influence and challenge cross-class coalitions or movements for social justice and inclusive citizenship.

It is necessary to understand inequalities among women but in doing so one should not lose sight of gendered inequalities between men and women. This focus on gender-based inequalities requires a focus at multiple levels: the household, the community and the state. Who is responsible for arranging water? Who labours for it? Under what circumstances? And at what physical, emotional, social and financial costs? The unequal gendered burdens are evident in the responses offered by women and men who each articulate a gendered division of labour that places the onus of responsibility for water collection on women while denying them the right to make decisions about where, when and how much water is accessed. Thus, there is a need to further open up the 'black box' of household and community, while avoiding the pitfall of idealizing community participation (Sultana 2009b). Exploring gendered inclusions and exclusions is important in ensuring that collectivizing efforts will bear fruit for all.

Water justice was a common theme throughout this study. People's desire to have public water was not just for life and survival, but also about exercising rights and redressing injustices in the urban fabric that were reinforced by inequitable water provision. Claiming public water was thus partly a larger claim on full citizenship status. The overwhelming majority of Korail respondents wanted public water provision via DWASA that would be equitably distributed throughout the slum. They wanted their water crises resolved through formal

means and wanted to put an end to the uncertainties and illegalities they were forced to live with. In the end, the everyday problems linked to water that is insufficient, poor in quality and only sporadically available affects many other aspects of life, such as health, employment opportunities and children's ability to attend school.

Thus, it is important to engage with broader gendered water concerns that impinge on a range of issues that affect not only physical and emotional wellbeing but also life and livelihood opportunities. This study underscores the significance of a gendered perspective, the need to focus on women's lived realities, and the importance of analyzing how the politics of place shape access, delivery and preferences for public water. Attention to gender, experience and place is crucial to any conceptualization of public service and water justice.

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Note

1 US$1 = BDT 80 (BDT = Bangladeshi taka).

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