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# Gender in Transboundary Water Management (TWM): Feminization and Beyond

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#### ABSTRACT

The feminist theorization into Transboundary Water Management (TWM) explicitly challenges the mainstream states' role, the nature, norms, and practices of water management. It is argued that the TWM is a masculine and male-dominated field excluding women and their roles. This paper seeks to analyze current trends of feminization in TWM. How this development can be achieved in the current practice? The TWM is a geopolitical issue where the state plays a key role often considering sovereignty, security, and national integrity. However, issues might have root causes at the ground level, and addressing this issue needs an inclusive approach to ensuring the framework of efficient, effective, sustainable, and good water governance. Despite the feminist approach, the paper advances the gendered approach for ensuring this framework.

**Keywords:** Gender; Transboundary Water Management (TWM); Feminization and Masculinity

### INTRODUCTION

The TWM is a dynamic process from initiation to outcomes ranging from involving diverse actors and interests. Though the actors and interests are intertwined with state-centric approaches and the state's interests, it has always been tied to the water security of individuals. It holds a range of top-down and bottom-up effects on the individual and from the individual. As the individual is not a homogenous group of people, the effects are manifested in different gender identities, roles, rights, and responsibilities requiring a gendered analysis to understand the dynamics of the transboundary water.

Gendered analysis has entered into the realm in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Gender has been used as a category of analysis to critically argue the process of water management in the male-dominated field and the involved actors are masculine. One of the most prominent works was

done by Earle and Bazilli (2013)<sup>1</sup> which contributes to the foundational framework for hydro-feminist theorization in water management. Other prominent writings of Lossow T. V. (2015)<sup>2</sup>; Natasha et al. (2019)<sup>3</sup>; and Sehring et al. (2023)<sup>4,5</sup> also contributes to further academic debates and discussion on gender mainstreaming and women's inclusion in the process of water management. These academic debates and discussions might have been backed by the global commitments to gender mainstreaming and women's incorporation reflected in many global and international policy frameworks.

There is a plethora of global and international policy frameworks where women's roles, needs, issues, and rights are often incorporated in the discourses. Until recently, many national water management policy frameworks are also significant parts of many nations' development plans, which seem to promote and embrace women's issues. Prominent examples include the 1992 International Conference on



Water and Environment (Dublin); Agenda 21; The General Assembly Resolution A/RES/58/217 i.e. the International Decade for Action, "Water for Life", (2005-2015)<sup>6</sup>; and Human Rights Council Resolution on Human Rights and Access to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation. Other legislation and policy frameworks include the Berlin Rules on Water Resources (2004), the Beijing Declaration for Action (1977), the Global Water Partnership, and the New Delhi Statement (1990) which are also the provisions where gender-related issues are mainstreamed. These frameworks have apparently supported gender mainstreaming with an emphasis on women's rights and roles in the process of water management. However, the contemporary framework focuses on women-centric with emphasis on the issues of gender equality and power balance between men and women regarding decision-making. Gender mainstreaming discourse has been significantly incorporated with an emphasis on women's roles, rights, and needs for ensuring gender equality to a larger extent.

The TWM has always remained a question to geopolitics where state plays crucial role in legislation, policy framework, and decision-making while considering national security, sovereignty, and integrity which does not consider people as the centre one. This makes more challenging task for feminism to make more women visible and gender equality. In fact, the hydro-feminist theorization focusing on women-centric somehow lacks a comprehensive and inclusive people-centric approach to explain the dynamic of water management. Therefore, the paper in addition to contemporary feminist theorization advances the gendered approach as a more instrumental expecting the outcome of inclusiveness, and effectiveness that can contribute to the development of conflict resolution and sustainable management. It signifies how a gendered approach explains the root causes of water conflict embedded in different gender identities, roles, rights, and responsibilities.

## GENDER, FEMINIZATION, AND WATER MANAGEMENT

Gender refers to different roles, rights, and responsibilities associated with men and women (UN-Water 2014)<sup>6</sup>. It is about socially constructed identities and identifications of being who men and women or others (Sehring, Horst and Zwarteveen 2023)<sup>4,5</sup>. It is the constructed characteristics that create certain identities for being men and women, what and how one should behave. These characteristics and identities are manifested in certain roles and responsibilities assigned to particular gender identities and identifications within a particular time and place. For instance, men are traditionally assigned to productive duties and assigned to the public domain, while women are assigned to reproductive roles that are defined in the private sphere. Power distributions based on the characteristics and identities created within a particular time and place determine these unequal relations

(IWRM 2021)<sup>7</sup>. This determines the roles, status, and position of men and women and other gender identities in the water sector.

Gender has emerged as a key component in the management of water resources because it is a concept that is universal and offers a worldwide perspective. Legislation, regulations, and tactics are substantially impacted by gender issues, including inequality and power dynamics. Women are often asserted as disadvantaged and underrepresented in decision-making as compared to men. Gender inequality and power differences in water management legislation, policies, and strategies disproportionately affect women, who are often disadvantaged due to their lower power positions, affecting their response to changes in water resource management. Men-women relations and inequalities impact collective responses to water issues, with women often facing obstacles in project participation, user committee involvement, and consultation input (UNDP 2006)<sup>8</sup>. For instance, women and girls in low- and middle-income nations face disproportionate daily impacts due to water scarcity, spending 200 million hours collecting water from distant sources (Anju Dwivedi 2021)<sup>9</sup>. The time spent collecting water significantly impacts education, economic, and personal development, as gender roles often determine access to resources and rights between men and women (IWMI n.d.)<sup>10</sup>. It determines who is responsible for water collection and management within households and societies. For instance, women in many regions are the primary water collectors and managers for providing water for the household sector and societal activities, especially in the rural areas.

Furthermore, women are disproportionately affected by water management activities, including hydropower projects, irrigation, and dam construction, due to their different roles, rights, and power spectrum. Addressing water-related hazards is therefore crucial for gender equality in water management. Gender inequality also hinders women from participating in decision-making processes like water committees and policy formulation. The intersectionality of gender with race and class also influences access to and control over these norms. This power spectrum has created space for hydro-feminism to critically argue the field of TWM as male-dominated with seemingly male-centric and gendered identities of state actors.

## FEMINIZATION OF WATER MANAGEMENT

Feminist theorization in the field of TWM is relatively a recent development. Gender and feminism entered into the realm only in the early second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The analysis, claim, and argument found in a few academic writings are the contributing and foundational stone of feminist theorization of water management at the transboundary level. Although IR Feminist theory has extensively gained popularity for gendered analysis in



foreign policy and diplomacy, water feminization is slightly deliberate in water management analysis. However, it is possible to identify specific works' concepts as significant progress up until quite recently<sup>11</sup>.

TWM has been a part of foreign policy and diplomacy which is studied in the academic discipline like International Politics/Relations, Security Studies, Political Science, and Peace and Conflict Studies. The actors involved in the process are mainly state and state actors such as highly political leaders, diplomats, and engineers those positions are usually occupied by men or males until recently. The management approach has been part of Western ideas of what we call the 'hydraulic mission' primarily the construction of mega-infrastructure such as dams and water transfer schemes. This practice is done with an emphasis on the heroic engineering approach being on construction, command, and control (Earle and Bazilli 2013)<sup>1</sup>. And the field like engineering is men's dominated profession until recently. Hence, such practices have become the centers and created a space for feminist critics and theorization. This is the way how feminist counter-argument delves and digs into the norms of masculinity.

Feminism in water management essentially contends that men dominate all aspects of modern water management practice, from policy formulation to implementation. All of the decision-making participants, policymakers, and significant stakeholders are men. It is claimed that the practice of managing water is carried out by men for their gain, which has an adverse effect on women and girls. It is claimed that the role of the state is primarily masculine in nature since it is represented by technical, economic, and political elites operating in terms of national interest irrespective of women, local communities, and other water users (Earle and Bazilli 2013)<sup>1</sup>. The decision-making process, policy-making, and implementation level are dominated by the masculine identities of foreign ministers, diplomats, and technical stakeholders mainly engineers. Against this backdrop, Earle & Bazilli (2013)<sup>1</sup> conclude that research in two highly masculinized academic fields, such as international relations and political science, supports the claim that transboundary water management is based on heroic engineering approaches that emphasize construction, command, and control. It is claimed that laws, policies, and initiatives are gendered and mute on gender issues. It is also claimed that the current institutional arrangement and basin-wide management practices exclude gender issues and are silent on the incorporation of women's roles, rights, and needs (Lossow 2015)<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, Carmi et.al (2019)<sup>3</sup> concludes that women are limited in decision-making and water diplomacy due to patriarchal societies, gender inequalities, and customs. They must be given the tools to participate in decisions about water diplomacy and create stable societies by boosting their efforts in society, strengthening their roles in local economies, and increasing

their civic and political involvement (Natasha, Alsayegh and Zoubi 2019)<sup>3</sup>.

In recent work, Jenniver et.al (2023)<sup>4,5</sup> has collected some of the prominent sections carried out by different academicians and policy-makers in respect of the feminist theorization of water management. The editors of this volume at first argue that water management is gendered by its profession. Some chapters emphasize the gendered analysis of certain transboundary water management institutions and their policies and strategies. Feminist theory is primarily the foundation for the overall comprehension, concepts, and argument of contemporary academic literature. The studies primarily focus on the issues of discrimination, inequality, and power relations, as well as the diversity of the actors involved in the process of managing water resources, and they frequently make arguments that are critical of the norms, practices, and state actors.

The core intention reflected in the arguments of contemporary hydro-feminism is to mainstream gender issues relating to women. Their key challenges remain to make more women visible in the decision-making process and change the traditional norms, practices, and involved actors in water management. They challenge to state-centric approach considering a more human-centric approach. They are intended to address inequalities that are linked to the devaluation of female or feminine (Sehring, Horst and Zwartveen 2023)<sup>4,5</sup>. However, the feminist approach has somehow failed to bring a comprehensive and inclusive approach to understanding how dynamic water management is. A deep analysis with an inclusive human-centric approach is missed out on addressing the root causes of water conflict at different levels which shape the TWM in a larger context.

## BEYOND FEMINIZATION: FROM A GENDERED APPROACH?

Despite the theorization of hydro-feminism for women's roles in the decision-making process, the gendered approach highlights different attitudes, roles, and responsibilities of both men and women without isolating anyone. As the gender is a universal term serving each and every person associated with being men and women, girls and boys. The gendered approach delves into the concept of gender using gender as an analytical tool to gather information and knowledge about water issues. It considers attitudes, roles, and responsibilities of both men and women, acknowledging differences in access to resources and work benefits, aiming for full participation of both genders. It highlights differences between women and men within households, conventions, and hierarchies determining their positions, and differences based on age, wealth, ethnic background, and social, economic, and technological trends that rapidly change gender roles and relations (Maharaj 2003)<sup>12</sup>.



In water management, the gendered approach implies that men and women, including boys and girls, have different attitudes, roles, and responsibilities in accessing and controlling water resources at all levels (household, community, regional, and international level). Water resources in this sense are tied to the water security of individuals associated with a particular gender category whether men or women or others. The water security of individuals encompasses a range of management of water-related issues such as conflict often caused by water scarcity, floods, droughts, etc. It occurs at different levels in different geographical contexts always tied to individual livelihood. A gendered approach is essential for addressing the issues working at the range of bottom-up and top-down effects.

The water conflict between the riparian states occurs at the international level. However, its causes are rooted in the water security of individuals often occurring at household and community levels. This conflict contributes to international as there is a range of bottom-up elevation and top-down ramifications (Offutt 2023). For instance, any water conflict can occur at the local level within a household or society due to water insecurity often caused by flood, drought, scarcity, etc. These might emanate from water management activities such as infrastructural development for hydro-power, reservoir, and irrigation. The conflict then contributes to the development of regional conflict, and this becomes a political issue in the larger contexts resulting in national and international. The process of politicization is crucial for mainstreaming the issue of conflict as there is political pressure from local users and communities to the local or constituent leaders and representatives.

There has been a plethora of such water-related conflicts across the world which can be prominent examples in this regard. The case of the Teesta and Tipaimukh infrastructural developments are paramount examples that have already shaped water management between state actors and local communities. Due to the conflict occurrence at border sites between India and Bangladesh, it has become more crucial in terms of bilateral relations. Against this backdrop, a comprehensive and inclusive analysis is essential for providing the authentic knowledge and insight that have been embedded in different attitudes, roles, rights, and concerns of different gender identities. Addressing water conflict to ensure sustainable management is crucial for gathering correct and authentic information regarding water conflicts, and the root causes. Formulating a gendered approach crucially works for involving actors to identify and fill knowledge gaps through surveying information of everyone stratifying gender categories. Any water planner and managers (mainly state actors) adopting a gendered approach at any level (whether local, regional, or international) contributes to addressing the issues of the conflicts simultaneously holding a range of top-down or bottom-up ramifications. For instance, a gendered approach can provide

a deep analysis of different roles, rights, responsibilities, needs, and concerns of different gender identities (men, women, and others) to water issues in the case of Tipaimukh or Teesta. The decision-makers will have knowledge and insight regarding the root causes of the conflict. Once these issues are mainstreamed in the legislation and policy framework, it can hold an effect of sustainable management at the implementation level from the top to down. In reverse, sustainable management at the ground level can contribute to being more effective, efficient, and sustainable at the top, particularly at the international level.

## CONCLUSION

This article is a secondary based with theoretical underpinnings from gendering water management in the case of Transboundary waters. The article concludes that there is a concrete link between different water conflicts and management at different levels in different geographical contexts. The feminist theoretical intervention has intended to raise the current practice and nature of water management. It challenges the state's role and the masculine nature of water management. Feminism has explicitly raised the discourse to mainstream gender issues with an emphasis on women's roles. Gender equality and mainstreaming women's roles in the decision-making process are the ultimate goals of hydro-feminism. But mainstreaming more and more women and their roles in the decision-making process solely will not contribute to conflict resolution and sustainable management. The TWM is a geopolitical issue that involves state actors concerning national sovereignty, security, and integrity where the state never compromises its sovereignty and national security. Even if the decision-makers are female, they are bound to be within the state's commitments. With this prospect, the article therefore has come up with an alternative gendered approach, which is beyond feminization. A gendered approach in this regard can be instrumental in ensuring effective and sustainable management in the TWM. It can be a tool for conflict resolution and sustainable management as the water conflicts are rooted in the issues of water security of the individual.

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