



PROGRAM ON
WATER GOVERNANCE



EDGES

ENVIRONMENT & DEVELOPMENT
GENDER, EQUITY, SUSTAINABILITY

Women Talking about Water: Feminist Subjectivities and Intersectional Understandings

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Final version:

L. Harris, J. Phartiyal, D. Scott, M. Peloso (2015) Women Talking about Water: Feminist Subjectivities and Intersectional Understandings. *Canadian Women's Studies Journal, Les Cahiers de la Femme*, Special Issue on Women and Water. 30, 2/3: 15-24. <http://www.cwscf.ca/>

Citations of this work should use the final version as noted above

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Contents

Abstract	1
Introduction.....	2
Methodology.....	3
Focus group site selection	3
Focus group structure and analysis	4
Findings.....	5
Key equity dimensions highlighted	5
Social embeddedness of water	5
Equity dimensions of water governance challenges.....	6
Considering Indigeneity	7
Intergenerational concerns.....	8
Discussion and conclusions	11
References	13

ABSTRACT

Dans cette étude basée sur des discussions tenues par des groupes de femmes à travers le Canada sur les défis et intérêts au sujet de l'eau, nous avons reconnu que dans le contexte actuel au Canada, les femmes sont véritablement connectées avec les peuples, les humains ou tout autre forme de vie. Elles reconnaissent que l'eau est implantée socialement, intégrant les questions de justice sociale, écologique et intergénérationnelle en relation avec les changements complexes des paysages riverains. À l'évidence, leurs propos sont dans une perspective genrée, mais nous avons aussi trouvé un mouvement au-delà du genre qui nuance la compréhension intersectorielle, des liens essentiels entre les genres, la classe et l'ethnicité sont fréquemment mentionnés.

INTRODUCTION

In her recent provocation, *Feminist Subjectivity, Watered*, Astrid Neimanis suggests that water enables and foregrounds key points of connection between our bodies and our environments, and between all living things: because we are mostly water, and our bodies are fundamentally altered by the water we intake, focusing on water is analytically and politically useful to understand the deep connections that bind us to each other, and to the broader natural world. This understanding, Neimanis argues, allows for a reinvigorated feminist subjectivity that is attuned to the intricate interconnections between our bodies and our surroundings, and the ways that we are embedded in complex social, political, and ecological systems and relationships.

Our work, based on diverse focus groups with women across Canada regarding water concerns and challenges, offers evidence of the ways that women in the contemporary Canadian context talk about water to demonstrate that they are indeed attuned to connections among people, as well as between humans and other life. The types of subjectivities we witness among the women interviewed recognize the social embeddedness of water, integrating questions of social, ecological, and intergenerational justice in relation to complex and changing waterscapes. While our evidence certainly illuminates a gendered perspective, we also find movement beyond gender to highlight a nuanced and intersectional understanding, frequently articulating key linkages between gender, class, and Indigeneity.

Drawing from feminist scholars, including frameworks common to feminist political ecology, our approach foregrounds the “gendered and relational quality of embodied environmental experience” (Banerjee and Bell 7). Further, our findings support Damayanti Banerjee and Michael Bell’s notion that “the dialogue of social difference at a gendered moment immediately seeks to make connections with other moments of social difference...” (7). We find this understanding useful to enrich our appreciation of the conceptual bases many women rely on in understanding and speaking to water issues and concerns, particularly as women are often at the forefront of water related resistance and mobilization (see, for examples, Shiva; Bennett et al.), even as they are often marginalized in water policy and governance debates.

We begin with an overview of our methods and site selection before turning to the findings. While we do not have the opportunity in this short paper to draw extensively on the focus group discussions, we highlight several key themes that emerged—notably those related to the ways that women demonstrated a socially embedded, justice-oriented, and intersectional appreciation of water.

METHODOLOGY

Focus groups aim to create an open interchange, with the purpose of achieving a higher level of understanding regarding what participants see as critical to their interests in regards to a particular issue. In this case, our objective was to promote flexible dialogue surrounding relationships to water. In contrast to individual interviews, focus groups allow convergent and divergent opinions and experiences to come to the fore. Through coding and analysis, it is then possible to identify thematic patterns and outliers at the center of public discourse.

Focus group site selection

Six focus groups were conducted with women in the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Ontario in 2013. As Gemma Dunn et al. point out, British Columbia (bc) and Ontario share important similarities and differences in terms of topography, water access, as well as historical developments and current water policy . Our aim in including sites across both provinces was to gain a broad appreciation of diverse women’s perspectives in the contemporary Canadian context, while taking account of commonalities, differences, and tensions that might exist. Within both provinces, specific communities were selected from among those who are currently facing water-related challenges, including issues that have recently been highlighted in the news media. For instance, in one community there had been contamination of potable water source; in another a novel water treatment and delivery system had been introduced; and in another there was a proposal for an increased private sector role in water management.

Located on the western coast of Canada, the province of British Columbia is often perceived to be rich in freshwater endowments. Currently, British Columbians are among the largest consumers of water in the world (bc, 2010). This is in part due to the fact that many residents in metropolitan areas currently do not pay separately for their water based on usage, though water metering is currently being introduced. bc is also presently updating its nearly century-old water legislation, with recent approval (2014) of The Water Sustainability Act, which includes introduction of pricing, groundwater management, and other key elements. Highlighting the importance of water to bc residents, a 2010 survey by McAllister Opinion Research found that 91% of respondents in the province considered fresh water to be the province’s most precious resource.

In the wake of highly-publicized water contamination issues (most notably the 2000 Walkerton drinking water crisis), Ontario re-structured its water governance regime over recent years towards an emphasis on watershed protection and local participatory involvement (Hania). Challenges persist across the province, including tensions related to the introduction of public-private partnerships (p3s), as well as the large proportion (almost 50%) of First Nations reserves under long-term boil water advisories (Chiefs of Ontario, 2015, a situation also true in bc). Thus, while Ontario is at the forefront of water

governance innovation, it also exemplifies ongoing challenges.

Focus group structure and analysis

A total of 38 women participated across six focus groups. In most cases, focus groups were set up in partnership with community organizations (including women's groups, environmental organizations, or community centres), which facilitated the recruitment of a broad range of local residents. We also partnered with a First Nations organization in each province to gain an enriched appreciation of Indigenous women's perspectives both on and off reserve. Recruitment occurred through a combination of advertisements posted in centers, through an organization's website or blog, as well as through craigslist, and/or through word of mouth.

Focus group participants spanned 18 to 65 years of age. Employment status and profession included students, teachers, government representatives and retirees, among others. Ethnic and economic diversity was not explicitly targeted due to the open method of recruitment (with partner organizations). As well, comprehensive personal data was not required of the participants. That said, based on the responses given, there was clear diversity of income, ethnic identification, and geography across the participants.

One person moderated all BC focus groups and another moderated the Ontario discussions, guided by a shared script of questions. The themes covered included experiences and relationships with water, health and well-being, roles and responsibilities linked to water use and management, and water marketization and pricing. Our objective was to cover a variety of water-related topics through prompting while also inviting improvisation and sharing by participants. In this way, we were able to explore the key frames that women deploy to respond to, and make sense of, on-going water governance shifts as well as current concerns and senses of water affecting their communities. Consistent with general focus group guidelines, and also aiming to encourage a diversity of ideas while permitting all voices to be heard, five to nine participants were present in each discussion.

The research team determined codes as they emerged from the transcripts, using an inductive process to allow patterns and themes to emerge. In turn, we discussed and resolved discrepancies, and developed a revised coding structure. At this point the transcripts were read again and recoded, allowing for consistency in analysis across our sites. In the end, there were a total of 54 codes used to capture major concepts and themes from the focus groups. Apart from inability to generalize and other concerns related to focus group methods, other limitations included possibilities for selective recruitment through our study design. As well, it is important to keep in mind that while our groups were aimed at participants from the general public, one focus group in each province involved advocacy groups and participants involved in water policy and research. The modest compensation provided to offset lost work hours and/or transit costs (\$40) may have also been attractive to some women, but not others.

FINDINGS

Key equity dimensions highlighted

The first major theme that emerges from the transcripts is the ways women’s narratives demonstrate a socially and ecologically embedded understanding of water. By this we mean that women did not describe water governance challenges in abstracted technical or scientific language, but often highlighted social and natural interactions as key to the concerns they discussed, or their own personal biographies related to water. Related to this, a second major theme that emerges is that women highlighted equity and justice as key to their water-related understandings. As we noted in the introduction, gender was certainly present in these discussions, but women’s narratives frequently emphasized class (or poverty), Indigeneity, and intergenerational equity. We devote the bulk of the remaining discussion to elucidating this socially-embedded, justice-oriented, and intersectional approach to assessing water governance challenges.

Social embeddedness of water

Before proceeding to provide examples, we would like to emphasize that we are not suggesting that this socio-naturally embedded appreciation is due to a “natural” or inherent connection between women and water. Instead, more consistent with feminist political ecology, we expect that women’s labour-related practices, and specific gendered roles, education, or positionalities, are largely responsible for this appreciation and sensibility (cf. Harris; Ressureccion and Elmhirst). This is also not to deny the strongly held belief of Indigenous peoples and others that women do have distinctive and unique connections to water, including women’s role as life-givers and caretakers of families and of water (see, for example McGregor). As we discuss throughout the analysis below, we also consider that the gendered nature of poverty, labour, social reproduction, and other key social processes are in part responsible for women’s unique perspectives on water use, access, and conditions. This was indeed part of our impetus for seeking out women’s specific perceptions related to water challenges in Canada.

As one example of perspectives that accent linkages both between people and between humans and the natural world, one woman (aged 35-40 years old) from Kamloops, bc described her understanding of water as linked to her Aboriginal identity, and connected to her own economic decision-making:

"[A]s a First Nations person who grew up in the northwest coast... the natural resources and everything in there that do come from the water, the salmon, the mussels, the clams, everything that comes out of there is part of our culture and if we didn't have that a lot of our culture would go and that's why you see like all these protests and stuff up there regarding the Enbridge pipelines and development."

A non-Aboriginal, 40-45-year-old woman from Chilliwack, bc highlights her frustration with the rejection of an embedded conception she sees in much of Western thought:

"I don't know why we human beings think we're exempt from the web of life... I've been contemplating how world views play and all of this lately and where we're at in western society with this sort of attitude of just like total entitlement in a culture founded on dominance of other cultures and other species and landscapes and control of natural landscapes."

Many other participants expressed their socio-naturally embedded appreciation of water with simple statements such as *"Everything is linked to water"* (35-40 years old woman, Thunder Bay, on) and *"Water is a part of us and everything around us the way it ebbs and flows—water is everywhere, it doesn't care for the borders and boundaries"* (55-60 years old woman, Nobleton, on). Recalling Neimanis' notion of a reimagined feminist subjectivity related to water, here we see a strong sense that many women appreciate the role of water in connecting us, to each other, and to the broader natural world. This embedded appreciation, we argue, is also strongly linked to the frequent emphasis on specific vulnerabilities, as well as broader justice or equity concerns that were strong features of our discussions.

Equity dimensions of water governance challenges

Participants recognized that there are many who are particularly vulnerable to water-related changes, including impoverished populations, elderly persons, those with disabilities, and First Nations women. Highlighting income, for instance, participants expressed concern with pricing-related changes, particularly for those on fixed incomes:

"I'm on a pension. If they put the price of water up, oh, what do I cut down on? That's just how it is on a pension, you know, you have to make decisions what you spend your money on," (60-65-year-old retired teacher, Chilliwack, bc).

Income and poverty was also highlighted in discussions of water habits, as many agreed consumption is influenced directly by income. For instance, a 30-35 year-old woman from Vancouver, bc shared her concern:

"I think that's a huge concern especially for people who are on a low income, for people who are seniors. So yeah, then it's going to be oh yeah, of course, like we have a dishwasher and we can afford to run it but that's because we're both doctors."

As well, women in Vancouver, Nobleton and Guelph, on discussed conservation and cost-related incentives that may not benefit lower income households, particularly if those households already use less water than their higher income counterparts. A 45-50-year-old woman from the Vancouver focus group illustrates this point through her personal experience:

"I think circumstances, financial circumstances, determine how much water you use because at the moment I'm living in a cheaper apartment so I don't have a dishwasher. I don't have a (clothes) washer. I don't have a dryer. So right away I would be using less than someone in [a higher income area] for example."

Concern with vulnerable and low-income populations also was raised to highlight the imperative that government, corporations or other entities should be doing more to

protect water as a broader common good (from overuse, contamination, or other threats). For instance, it was expressed that those with money could protect themselves, and buy what they needed to ensure their health (e.g. buying bottled water if needed): *“People who can afford to buy water fare better.”* Along these lines, women in the Chilliwack and Guelph focus groups discussed the use and installation of water filtration systems in higher-income households, and the ability to buy bottled water in times of scarcity. Many times over there was general frustration, highlighting that often lower-income people are not given due consideration, or are implicitly considered less worthy of high quality water. This sentiment was clearly expressed by a woman in the Vancouver focus group: *“If you make no money or you make under a certain income level, you don’t deserve water. That’s just ridiculous.”*

Related to the understanding of poverty and related equity concerns, women at all sites also suggested that water quality was generally poorer in low-income neighborhoods (a fact born out in many environmental justice studies such as Debanne and Keil, and clear from many works on First Nations water quality such as Phare or Boyd). Women also recounted their own differentiated experiences with water quality, for instance, when living in different parts of town. For example, this woman’s description from the Chilliwack group was met with vociferous agreement:

“But even going back to the different experiences like ... chlorination. People who could afford it were able to buy water filtration systems for their homes... And people who couldn’t, they’re on chlorination. So there’s definitely classes. It’s very real here in Chilliwack definitely apparent that we’ve got poorer neighbourhoods.”

A 35-40-year-old woman from Thunder Bay shared differences she has noted in water taste across neighborhoods:

“Even here in the city of Thunder Bay the water itself like at my household you can’t really taste the chlorine. I went over to the east end over the bridge ... and I took a sip of water and it was just like pure chlorine. So again from one area of the city to the other there’s a big difference and we’re still paying the same, it’s supposed to be the same quality of water.”

Women also drew on other life experience, highlighting differences based on income, when they were renters versus homeowners, or to suggest the specific vulnerability of students who are frequently exposed to aging infrastructure.

Considering Indigeneity

Water issues are pronounced for First Nations people in many parts of the country—so much so that several commentators refer to water access and quality in Canada as a *“two tiered system”* (Christensen, Phare and Goucher, and Mascarenhas). Over the past year, there have been as many as 135 Drinking Water Advisories in effect in 90 First Nation communities across Canada, excluding British Columbia (Health Canada). Consistent with these realities, Aboriginal participants raised concerns related to water infrastructure and funding cuts. For instance, a 60-65-year-old woman from the Thunder Bay focus group shared her frustration related to her own reserve community:

"I took the water training course and we talked about the legislation in that and we've been trying and trying to be as par with the provincial level but aren't even near there. And then they go, "Oh we're cutting the funding in water". Pardon me? Aren't we supposed to have the same quality as every other Canadian in Canada?"

Noting intersections between Indigeneity and poverty, a 40-45-year-old Aboriginal woman living off-reserve in Vancouver shared:

"They can't afford it. A lot of people on the reserves they're on fixed incomes because there's no opportunities over there. So when their water goes out they have to just rely on whatever is in the tap and take care of it themselves."

Another participant from Vancouver talked about the conditions experienced at the reserve in Fort Simpson, BC:

"Yeah, they still have a bad system over there. Especially during the winter time and stuff they're constantly on boiled water alert. Constantly... And nobody would be able to afford bottled water over there. They're just boiling their water and letting it settle."

Apart from the key challenges faced by these communities, participants also shared the wisdom and importance of Indigenous knowledge and management practices. A 30-35-year-old Aboriginal woman from Kamloops stressed the Aboriginal perspective and belief system and its incongruencies with the dominant perspective on water: *"Yeah it's important when you're Aboriginal. We really are the protectors. I think we want to protect but it's not in our control. Which means the relationship is different."* Related to this, a 60–65 Aboriginal woman spoke to the importance of respect:

"I guess we were brought up in our ways of respecting. Our religion is ... based on respect, respecting people, Mother Earth, and respecting others and ourselves. So again when the values and morals are instilled in you it's just a matter of respecting. We don't abuse it."

Taken together, these remarks suggest the ways that traditional perspectives and knowledge could be useful in Canadian water policy—a theme also underscored by a 20–25-year-old Aboriginal woman from the Thunder Bay group: *"maybe they need to look at it the way we look at it. Tradition isn't in the policy. And the people with the knowledge aren't really there to get it in."*

Intergenerational concerns

A final theme that speaks to the embedded, intersectional, and justice-oriented appreciation of water was the common invocation of intergenerational equity—the idea that we inherit the Earth from previous generations and have an obligation to pass it on in reasonable condition to future generations (Collins). Many highlighted this concern when speaking about family and the future (bringing in for instance, women's specific roles as mothers and care givers). A participant from the Kamloops focus group mused: *"Really gives you something to think about for the future. If I have to pay for water I will. Like for the future generations to have good clean water then that's what we have to do."* Others also expressed anxiety and concern about the implications of climate

change or changing water governance and infrastructure practices for the future. Among them, a 30-35-year-old Aboriginal woman from the Thunder Bay focus group noted: *“Just seeing all the world issues with water and flooding. So as a mother I’m concerned in the long run what’s going to happen, just the stories that we hear on the news, what we see with our eyes and what our elders are telling us.”* Another Thunder Bay participant discussed changes she has observed:

“And myself like I grew up with water, like a lake, swimming in it and now it’s like I look at the water and I don’t even want my kids to go swimming in it compared to like a long time ago like I used to jump in there. Now you see like a film on top of the water. I don’t want to think how bad it gets next.”

A 50–55-year-old woman from Nobleton shared similar worries: *“...like our Great Lakes they’re going down. Every year they go down.... There’s not going to be any more fresh water. So like it’s scary.”* Finally, a 45-50-year-old woman from the Chilliwack group highlighted concern for the future: *“It’s going to be I believe one of the great issues of the future... water supply and access to water, clean water particularly. It’s already being experienced all over the world so it’s going to come home.”*

In such narratives, we see a common focus on women’s role as caregivers, mothers, or “keepers of the water,” all accentuating an interest in preserving water quality for the children and future generations. A mother from the Thunder Bay focus group succinctly summarized this: *“Just having kids makes you more aware.”* Pregnancy and reproduction came up multiple times, signaling a critical window when the women were, or when they believe that women should be, more vigilant about water quality. For instance, an Aboriginal woman from the Thunder Bay focus group expressed concern about health effects from exposing a fetus to any toxin:

“...if our kids are drinking that polluted contaminated water we’re putting ourselves at risk for defects in children. Like we’ve always been taught about the importance of not drinking alcohol while you’re pregnant but there’s also like drinking poisoned water too and there could be chemicals in it that we don’t know; it has effects on us.”

A 25-30-year-old woman from the Kamloops focus group shared:

“At my house it tastes weird and it smells bad. And some times of the year it smells worse than other times. So I just buy my water and I don’t want to give my son, my baby water from the tap that smells gross. So I just buy it.”

When women felt they had not successfully protected children, they also discussed feelings of worry and guilt. For example, the following statement by a 40-45-year-old woman from Chilliwack was met with high agreement:

“What’s really happening is that we’re made to feel guilty. We have to buy all these things, low water, you know. Everything has to be eco-friendly. But sometimes you can’t—not for me, not even my kids sometimes. It’s always the buy good/feel good and the little guy pays the price.”

Or, as another 30–35 year old mother from Thunder Bay commented: *“So that’s another issue there, potential issue with our water. I want to protect my kid, my family.”*

Can't protect when it's big like that though. I can't keep my kid safe you know, like a mom wants to."

With all of these examples, it was clear that any discussion of water concerns and challenges was highly attuned to key vulnerabilities and inequities, including those related to income inequality, or an intersectional appreciation of Indigeneity, poverty, gender, age, or other dimension. While we are not surprised by these findings, as it was precisely what we expected a focus on women's position and experience would highlight, we nonetheless find the clear intersectional and justice orientation of our participants to be important, and instructive for several ongoing debates in the realm of water policy.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Documenting women’s specific water concerns and subjectivities has the potential to intervene in interesting ways in long-term debates related to the value of feminist approaches in the environmental realm. As Bannerjee and Bell explain, there is frequently a rejection of focus in environmental work on women in efforts to avoid essentialist or romantic views of the connection between the feminine and the “natural” world—a critique which has been levied against certain strands of ecofeminist studies (see, for example, discussion in Sturgeon; Sandilands; and Scott). In our study, engaging with women’s voices did not lead to a narrow focus on gender, nor to the articulation of an essentialist “woman’s perspective.” Instead, women gave voice to complex subjectivities and nuanced, intersectional understandings of the justice and equity concerns raised by changing waterscapes and water governance regimes.

Adding to these discussions, we suggest that this positionality and women’s subjectivity related to water emerges from women’s specific societal, political, and economic positions. As such, women’s water-related subjectivities emerge in relation to labouring practices (including practices of mothering or reproductive labours, or due to the fact that gender, race, and poverty are often tightly coupled). For Canada, statistics show that women’s incomes have grown steadily over the past four decades. Yet, women’s incomes continue to be only about 2/3 of men’s, and this trend holds across every province (Statistics Canada, 2008; 2013). As well, women are more highly represented in precarious, part-time, and poorly paid employment. These are precisely the reasons why a focus on women’s specific understandings of water serves to highlight specific vulnerabilities and concerns that might accompany changing water pricing regimes, shifts in water quality, or associated challenges. We argue, in concert with others, that this orientation is important to highlight, particularly to counter technocentric and economistic mainstream approaches common in water policy circles, and given that women and other marginalized groups and knowledges are often excluded from these discussions. Following Ahlers and Zwartveen and related debates in feminist political ecology, we argue that a feminist approach can provide tools to decipher meaningful connections that otherwise might remain hidden within mainstream policies (including, for example, those related to neoliberalism).

While the connections between women and water, or between operations of difference, inequality, and power have long been strong themes found in work focused on the Global South, less research has focused on these issues in industrialized contexts such as Canada (Reed and Christie). Based on the rich insights revealed by the women in our focus groups, we endorse the idea that there is a strong need for more work on gender and water governance, as well as other intersectional approaches to inequality, difference, and changing socio-natures, including in contexts for the global North.

In closing, we note that our analysis related to women’s narratives of contemporary

water challenges in Canada gives life to elements of the new feminist subjectivity articulated by Neimanis—one that considers an embodied and embedded politics of location, as well as an intersectional approach that considers multiple axes of social difference and inequality. We learn that the lived experiences of women in several contexts in Canada, and their particular perspectives on water challenges, bolsters the proposition that “bodies are neither fully autonomous nor discrete, but rather always becoming in webs of mutual imbrication” (Neimanis 25). Our focus highlights a strong sense of mutuality and interconnection—albeit one that does not derive from a flat or essentialist notion that women are inherently connected to water. Quite the contrary, women’s water-related narratives from diverse sites in Canada cement key moves in the broader feminist literature towards an intersectional and nuanced appreciation of social, political, and ecological interconnections and challenges.

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