

Book Review: Gender dynamics in transboundary water governance: Feminist perspectives on water conflict and cooperation

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BOOK REVIEW

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Gender Dynamics in Transboundary Water Governance: Feminist Perspectives on Water Conflict and Cooperation

Edited By Jenniver Sehring, Rozemarijn ter Horst, Margreet Zwarteveen

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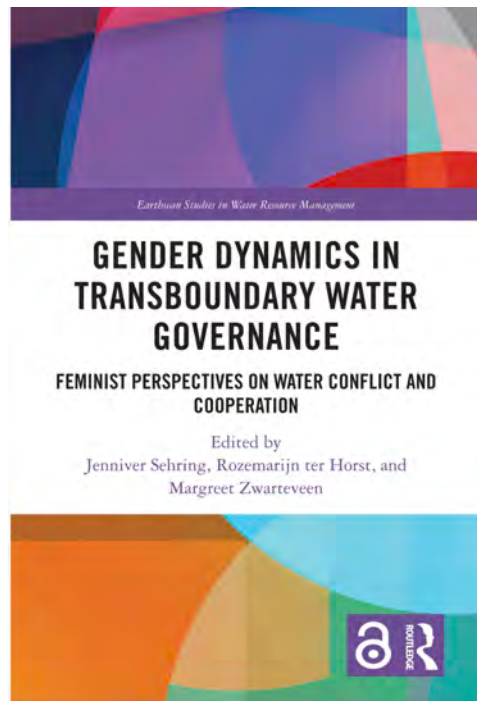
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The feminist perspective goes beyond treating gender as a single variable; it serves as a powerful analytical lens for understanding the complex social and political dynamics that shape relationships within and across societies. A key challenge for feminist scholars, however, is advancing feminism as a distinct and coherent worldview that fundamentally challenges the patriarchal logic of securitization, control, and territorial borders that dominate mainstream political thought. Feminism in this sense is not just a form of critique but an alternative framework for reimagining power and power relations across borders. This framework is especially crucial in the context of transboundary water governance, where national interests, international diplomacy, and state-centric power structures often dominate. By challenging these masculinist and technocratic frameworks, a feminist approach reveals how water governance is deeply intertwined with issues of equity, inclusion, and justice.

Gender Dynamics in Transboundary Water Governance: Feminist Perspectives on Water Conflict and Cooperation, edited by Jenniver Sehring, Rozemarijn ter Horst,



and Margreet Zwarteveen, makes a groundbreaking contribution by centering gender analysis in a field where it has long been sidelined. The book offers an essential alternative lens for understanding how power operates in the management and negotiation of shared water resources across borders. With an interdisciplinary team of scholars and practitioners, the volume interrogates how gendered power relations are embedded in and reproduced through the governance of transboundary waters, an area often portrayed as

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technocratic and politically neutral. Significantly, 18 of the 20 contributors to the volume are women.

With case studies from a range of geographies—South Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Europe—the book exposes how water-sharing processes are shaped not only by international law and state interests but also by social norms, power asymmetries, and everyday gendered experiences. Drawing on feminist political ecology and critical hydropolitics, the contributors dismantle the persistent assumption that transboundary water issues can be addressed through gender-blind policy and institutional reforms. The authors bring to the fore arguments beyond the idea of inclusion. For example, in her chapter, Medha Bisht advocates for a shift in perspective through what she terms “feminizing water” (74), an idea that goes beyond the recognition and participation of women. This concept involves reimagining water governance policies as more responsive to women’s needs and experiences. Such a shift requires a change in how we perceive and engage with water issues, emphasizing relationality and inclusivity. By advocating for a relational and networked approach, this book recognizes the complexities of power and the importance of gendered experiences in water diplomacy.

The book is comprised of an editor’s introduction and 11 chapters divided into three main parts. Part I consists of five chapters that establish the theoretical and conceptual foundations for rethinking knowledge production in water diplomacy through a feminist lens. This section critically engages with dominant paradigms in water governance and introduces feminist critiques that challenge masculinist and technocratic approaches. Part II is a shorter section with two chapters dedicated to examining the implementation of gender mainstreaming in transboundary water governance. It critically assesses existing policies and frameworks, highlighting both their potentials and limitations. Part III contains five chapters that delve into women’s lived experiences in the field of water governance and diplomacy, drawing on case studies and empirical insights. This section foregrounds the everyday realities and challenges faced by women working in water-related decision-making spaces, highlighting how gendered institutional processes shape participation, authority, and recognition, while also revealing strategies of resistance and agency employed by women in navigating these spaces.

One of the volume’s key strengths lies in its critical engagement with dominant institutional frameworks such as Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) and River Basin Organizations (RBOs). These frameworks, the authors argue, often fail to move

beyond symbolic inclusion of women, neglecting the structural inequities that shape participation and benefit-sharing. The book offers a compelling analysis of how formal diplomatic arenas tend to marginalize non-state actors—especially women, Indigenous groups, and local communities—who are often most affected by water conflicts and decision-making about cooperation. Gender has not been meaningfully integrated into the institutional framework of water discourse but addressed superficially through the inclusion of a few women in consultations without challenging underlying power imbalances, resulting in what Ellen Hagerman, Hellen Natu, and Christine Ochieng refer to in their chapter as “token approach to gender mainstreaming” (95).

Through interviews with female practitioners in the field of water diplomacy, the book presents a compelling narrative of how professional legitimacy for women often hinges on a disavowal of their womanhood. To be taken seriously, women are expected to conform to a narrow, patriarchal mold marked by technical expertise, emotional restraint, and assertiveness. As one expert is quoted: “when women talk about transboundary water, it’s not like they’re talking as the voice of women’s rights. In this position, women participants have to be thought of as men, with a very serious, assertive, and technical attitude” (189). This erasure intensifies when water is tied to productive uses such as irrigation, energy access, or livelihood security. In these contexts, water becomes a matter of state sovereignty, power, and geopolitics, and women are pushed further to the margins. Their everyday, embodied experiences with water—collecting it, using it, managing its scarcity—are dismissed as apolitical or irrelevant to international relations.

By bringing these dynamics into conversation, the volume effectively asserts a foundational feminist insight: *the personal is political*. Women’s daily encounters with water are not outside politics; they are shaped by and have stakes in decisions made at the highest levels of governance. Their exclusion from transboundary water diplomacy reflects not a neutral oversight, but a political choice that silences lived knowledge and sustains patriarchal power.

Overall, this book is indispensable for scholars and practitioners across disciplines—international relations, gender studies, political ecology, and environmental governance—who are seeking to engage with more inclusive, critical, and grounded approaches to water diplomacy. In its insistence that water governance is always and inherently gendered, this volume sets a new standard for what serious engagement with equity and power in transboundary water governance should look like.