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Gender justice and public water for all:

Insights from Dhaka, Bangladesh

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Municipal Services Project (MSP) is a research project that explores alternatives to the privatization and commercialization of service provision in electricity, health, water and sanitation in Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is composed of academics, labour unions, non-governmental organizations, social movements and activists from around the globe who are committed to analyzing successful alternative service delivery models to understand the conditions required for their sustainability and reproducibility.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study maps gender-water relations and brings to the fore women's struggles for access to clean and safe water in Korail, one of the largest informal settlements in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Among the world's most rapidly growing cities, Dhaka has implemented a neoliberal development agenda of increasing commercialization of basic services. Today, millions lack proper access to water, mostly in slums that account for nearly a third of the urban population.

In Korail, there are **key gendered differences in experiences with water** 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. What is more, decisions on water access and use that affect women's everyday lives are typically made by men. By unearthing women's experiences in the slum, we find that relationships at multiple levels of social life impact women's access to water, including a gendered division of labour in the household, patriarchal community structures, and lack of political representation. We further learn that water scarcity and the lack of decision-making power not only increases their daily **physical workloads**, but also deepens their **emotional strain**. We learn that women are fully aware that their daily water toil bears high **opportunity costs**, resulting in recurring sickness, limited educational or employment attainment, and stagnant social mobility.

This research also captures intersectionalities of gender and class and shows that although patriarchal norms affect women across class boundaries, wealthier women are neither affected by water scarcity nor worry about water in the same ways as poorer women. These **inequalities among women** are frequently overlooked in initiatives promoting women's rights and interests, and act as barriers to the full participation of all women in decision-making. The power relations and social hierarchies among women tend to silence the poor thereby allowing wealthier women to assert their particular interests as representative of the whole.

The **demand for public water** was found to be nearly universal in Korail. The majority of women surveyed desire public water because they believe it holds the promise of access for all at a more affordable cost. We also find that preferences for public water are not solely a representation of need, but also about exercising rights and redressing injustices in the urban fabric that are reinforced by inequitable water provision; it becomes simultaneously a **struggle for the full rights of citizenship**. Indeed, the place-based politics of water in Dhaka limits access to municipal water to legally sanctioned landowners, a symbolic expression of the widespread disregard for illegal slum residents who are left without formal or secure access to water.

Importantly, our research shows that daily water struggles engender strategies of survival, and generate knowledge and experience with the potential to redress inequalities from the ground up. Views articulated by the residents of Korail begin to weave together a narrative of **water justice**, an ethic of collective need, and a desire for community-wide access to a public good.



Korail slum in Dhaka, Bangladesh

Photo: Farhana Sultana

Overall, this study underscores the **importance of integrating a gendered perspective in debates on alternatives to privatization of water services**. It demonstrates 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 or private water. Not doing so risks entrenching local power hierarchies, further marginalizing the poor – and women in particular – and exacerbating their exploitation.

Guided by feminist ethnographic inquiry, this research develops a place-based understanding of gender-water relations that takes into account local power inequalities as much as large-scale political and economic systems. In doing so, we call attention to the place-based strategies that women develop through their struggles for access to water. These strategies represent possibilities and potentialities that women carve out of the constraints imposed by patriarchal, economic and political ideologies exerting pressure at all levels of social life: individual, household, community and beyond.

Our research indicates that gender-water relations and women's preferences for public or private delivery systems reveal tensions and complexities that cannot be parsed out in a reductionist fashion. Instead, **we argue in favour of an approach that is accountable and responsive to localized histories and struggles, but also flexible, strategic and able to facilitate alliances among groups and communities fighting for alternatives to water privatization**. Attention to gender, experience and place – and their multifaceted interplay – is crucial to build an equitable, sustainable and accountable public service and water justice anywhere. Only through such a politics of place will we be able to identify sustainable, locally relevant avenues to achieve water for all.

Introduction

Over the last 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 (McDonald and Ruiters 2012; McGranahan and Owen 2006; Rakodi 2000). Attention to gender has been identified by several authors as a significant lacuna in the broader water governance literatures as well as the recent alternatives literatures (Cleaver and Hamada 2010; O'Reilly et al 2009; Truelove 2011). This paper focuses on gendered preferences and understandings of the public-private water debates. It looks at the use, access and management of water, and promotes a historicized and politicized understanding of the struggles they have given rise to. We adopt a “politics of place” methodological framework, one that is accountable and responsive to localized histories and struggles at the same time as flexible and strategic enough to facilitate alliances among groups and communities fighting for alternatives to privatization. Through this pilot study, we map gender-water relations in one site, Dhaka, and discuss gendered constraints and possibilities surrounding water governance more generally, laying the groundwork for alternative systems of delivery that are responsive to women’s needs and interests and conducive to the emergence of a politicized sense of self and autonomy.

We report on empirical findings from Korail slum, one of the largest informal settlements in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Inasmuch as the Korail settlement has been shaped by history, so too have the experiences, choices and opportunities of the people who live there. Women’s struggles are deeply embedded in this terrain. The boundaries of what is permissible and possible are grounded in the politics of Korail, as well as the political economy and civil society institutions of Dhaka and Bangladesh. To create an equitable system of water provision, the intricate linkages between place and struggle need to be accounted for, or else any new system risks entrenching local power hierarchies, further marginalizing the poor and exacerbating their exploitation.

This paper maps the Bangladeshi political-economic context before focusing on Dhaka, and Korail slum in particular. It then analyzes how gender and class impact Korail water struggles, before discussing the complexities of the public-private water debate in Korail in relation to state and national policies as well as detailing service delivery preferences among research respondents. Our study reveals a strong preference among women surveyed for public water, which we address at length. We find that the preference for public water is shaped by experiences and beliefs pertaining to concerns over the affordability of water, a desire for full citizenship and legal standing, and a hope for water justice and equity. But first, we start by presenting our empirical research approach.

Research approach

The study draws on the Women and the Politics of Place (WPP) framework conceptualized by Harcourt and Escobar (2005), as introduced in “Gendering Justice” (Mohanty and Miraglia 2010). The WPP framework is a dynamic approach that calls our attention to women’s resistance to large-scale political, social and economic trends and unearths the place-based strategies and tactics that women employ in their struggles for social justice. WPP asks that we locate women’s activism within the politics of place embedded in particular sites, but it does not assume a parochial vision of social justice and change. To the contrary, this approach embeds the local in the global and facilitates transnational alliances among place-based movements driven by their resistance to global capitalism.

The field research that informs this paper 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 looks for thick description, specific data and stories that are profoundly gendered and relevant to the context. Ethnographic approaches capture a range of lived experiences through qualitative methods that represent the broader population without necessarily having to establish a large sample size. The fieldwork was conducted in 2012 by Farhana Sultana through participant observation, case studies and in-depth interviews, building on an expansive review of gender-water and water governance literatures and empirical findings from previous studies carried out over many years in Bangladesh. A detailed semi-structured questionnaire was developed to interview a total of 55 respondents (25 women and 30 men). Participants were initially drawn from elected community groups and leaders, and then randomly sampled from a range of locations in Korail (e.g. marketplace, homes, water points, etc.). There was a conscious effort to involve marginalized slum households as well as other class strata, but interviewing depended on people’s availability and willingness to participate.

Another questionnaire was developed for two focus group discussions (FGD) that would help gauge common concerns in the community and assess group preferences and lived experiences: one with 12 randomly selected men and women of Korail, and the other with eight randomly selected women so they could voice their opinions more freely. Information was also gathered by participating at community meetings in Korail. In addition, informal discussions with men and women in the wealthier surrounding neighbourhoods contributed a range of contrasting views. Interviews with relevant government officials, NGOs and international donors complemented the fieldwork. All quotes in this paper are presented anonymously to protect people’s identities.

We created a space for women to talk about their lived experiences, individually and collectively, because these are what conditions preferences for public versus private water, and people’s perception of the state and other development actors. In Korail, 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. Centering 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: "[W]here a space is created for women's own voices to be heard... a different set of needs may come into view" (Kabeer 1994: 230).

In addition, it was essential to carry out an intersectional analysis of gendered inequalities, looking at how class influences preferences for public versus private systems. Intersectionality permits analyzing the mutual construction and interlocking nature of oppression and requires a methodology that is attentive to differences among women (Crenshaw 1991; Hill-Collins 1998). As a result, the research was guided by several broad lines of query: How does a gendered division of labour take shape at multiple levels of social life (home, community, politics, etc.) and how would this impact development of an alternative system of water provision? What do we need to know about the intersection of gender and class inequalities to understand preferences for public or private systems of provision? What are the local power inequalities between women that compel us to move beyond a singular focus on increasing the number of women in decision-making?

By unearthing women's experiences and opinions 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.

Mapping contexts: Bangladeshi political economy and urban challenges

The political economy of Bangladesh – the 'politics of place' that form the terrain of women's water struggles in Korail – is shaped by its status as a former 'semi colony' of Pakistan (Kabeer et al 2010: 11) and by the effects of international aid. Bangladesh gained independence in 1971 after a war of liberation from Pakistani rule. Bangladesh needed development aid but the socialist leanings of its first government did not converge with the Cold War ideology of capitalist donor countries; as a result aid was withdrawn or limited. As funding for development projects waned, the government

was beleaguered by internal opposition and overthrown by a military coup in 1976, opening the way for economic liberalization. Foreign aid agencies rewarded the military regime with renewed funding (Kabeer et al 2010). Such trajectories may be common in the developing South, but in Bangladesh this process led to the exponential growth of NGOs with significant and unique societal impacts.

Initially, the socialist leanings of the independence leaders found echo in early NGO efforts to mobilize the poor to address inequality. Many NGOs were created by local groups and individuals who had minimal funds and relied on international donor agencies sympathetic with the goals of the independence movement (Kabeer et al 2010). But as space for progressive social action shrank after the military takeover, so too did the potential for NGOs to engage in social justice activism. The neoliberal economic turn of the 1980s soon transformed the role of the government in the life of citizens as social welfare assistance was reduced, and foreign aid started to flow to NGOs that began to fill gaps in service delivery left by the shrinking state.

With a larger pool of foreign aid available for the taking, the NGO sector changed in composition from small-scale, local entities to large-scale 'elite' organizations with the organizational structure and technological capacity required by the funding agencies. Thus the composition of Bangladeshi NGOs shifted with many adopting dispassionate approaches that address conditions of poverty using marketized tools, language and policies. Whereas previous NGOs sought to fundamentally transform injustice and inequality, social transformation is not necessarily part of the agenda today (Hashemi 1995).

The economic and political transformations in the NGO sector and the Bangladeshi government are inextricably linked to the ascendance of a neoliberal economic framework that negates the government's responsibility for the provision of basic services and calls for their commercialization. These broad changes are part of the politics of place that shape the struggle for access to clean and safe water throughout the global South, and definitely in Korail. The social terrain is further refined at the municipal, community, household and individual levels where national-level and municipal-level policies are reshaped by context-specific tensions, constraints and possibilities. As a result, urban growth and the expansion of slums such as Korail become intertwined with a range of economic, social and political processes that are mired in historical and ongoing struggles.

In this national political context, the political economy of Dhaka has taken a singular trajectory that impacts overall access to clean water in the Korail settlement. Dhaka is Bangladesh's largest city with 15 million people and attracts 300,000 to 400,000 new migrants annually (Hossain 2011). Unofficial statistics place Dhaka as the world's most rapidly growing city, with informal settlements accounting for nearly a third of the urban population. Dhaka's expansion is related to its modernizing and development agenda, and access to and uses of municipal water systems coincide with political and social objectives linked to notions of who does and does not belong in the city.

Whereas responsibility for the planning, construction, and modernization of water supply and sanitation throughout Bangladesh primarily resides with the national government's Department of Public Health Engineering, Dhaka and Chittagong (second largest city) are treated as exceptions because of concerns over rapid population growth and a resultant belief that a decentralized and locally managed structure is better suited to keep pace with change. The Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (DWASA) was formed in 1963 to manage the city's water (Haq 2006). Organizationally, DWASA is divided into 11 operational zones that are each managed locally by WASAs (Hoque 2003). The mission of DWASA 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 unmet coverage goals. The vagueness of the terminology 'city dwellers' conceals the fact that access to municipal water is solely reserved for landowners and excludes the millions of informal settlers, thereby providing a convenient cover for DWASA and city planners. The illegal squatter status permits the social exclusion of individuals living in informal settlements, including Korail, and gives way to a quasi-citizen status for the unwanted slum residents. The lack of access to municipal services brings into sharp relief the material implications of informality as a social and political identity.

While state bureaucrats around the world will argue that informal settlements are not planned or desired, there is reason to believe otherwise. Roy (2009, 2011), for example, argues that informality is part and parcel of globalizing cities in developing nations. 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 of the North. Thus the labour of Korail residents, for instance, 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 political and economic participation of its inhabitants.

Korail slum: The politics of place

Korail slum is located in the wealthiest part of Dhaka city, surrounded by the neighbourhoods of Banani and Gulshan and adjacent to Gulshan Lake. 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 took shape throughout the 1990s in response to the growing needs of an internal migrant population whose homes and land were expropriated or means of survival 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). Over more than 20 years 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 about 15 years (DSK 2010). The

emergence and endurance of Korail slum is inseparable from the perverse effects of Bangladesh's quest for economic growth: widening inequality and increasing landlessness drew migrants to the city for employment, and economic necessity brought them to the slum.



Aerial view of Korail slum, Dhaka

Photo: Farhana Sultana

The cost of living in the Korail slum is lower than other slums, and its proximity to places of work, in the shadow of expensive high-rises, make it an appealing option for the urban poor. The majority of Korail residents work as day labourers, rickshaw pullers, garments workers, maids, shopkeepers, drivers, hawkers, vendors, and a variety of other informal economy jobs. Monthly earnings range from BDT 4,000 to 12,000 (US\$50-150), a meager wage that does little to mitigate already intense conditions of poverty (DSK 2010). Even if the work performed by these migrants fuels economic growth, their labour does not pay adequately socially, politically or economically. As one Korail respondent notes: "The inhabitants of the Korail slum do not get basic needs met, we are treated as animals with 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" (FGD 1). The refusal to grant access to water is a particularly symbolic feature of the widespread disregard for slum residents who lack legal tenure rights to receive this service, and who live under permanent threat of eviction and slum demolition.

Every day, Korail residents endure the scarcity of water, a resource fundamental for life, and are continually reminded of their "unwanted" status. As one Korail respondent argued: "We are not seen as citizens of the country." The lack of legal water access marks the slum as a transitional space and serves to remind residents that they are politically expendable. What is rarely brought into view, however, is the fact that daily struggles engender strategies of survival, creating knowledge and experience with potential to undo inequalities from the ground up. Mapping the social landscape

and the interactions between bodies, place and history provides insight into alternative systems that would not only meet people's needs, but that would also bring social change and advance social justice.

Korail water struggles: Gender and class matter

Given the general lack of political will to extend water coverage to the urban poor, most families in Korail access water through informal means via water vendors, and water access is decided without any input from those primarily concerned: women. Obtaining illegal water is generally negotiated between the landlord, the male head of household, and the water vendors who frequently work with lower level DWASA employees to illegally pipe water into the slum to sell it at premium rates. Landlords work with vendors to arrange access for tenants and make full payment on their behalf; in turn, tenants pay landlords for their share of water as part of their rent. The charge to the landlords ranges from BDT 900-1,200 each month (US\$11-15), usually for one hour of water supply for all tenants. Each tenant is given access for five, 10 or 30 minutes at a time, which comes at a cost of approximately BDT 100-900 per month for each household depending on usage. The price paid for water through these informal means is much greater than the subsidized costs of municipal water, which average BDT 6.66 for 1,000 liters (according to DWASA). In contrast, water purchased by slum residents from illegal vendors can cost between BDT 2-5 for only 20 liters when purchased by the pitcher. Water vendors generally charge exorbitant fees for the resource regardless of its quality or the reliability of the service. Those who cannot pay undergo tremendous hardship to fetch water from remote places or pilfer water from the illegal pipes.



Illegal piped water system in Korail

Photo: Farhana Sultana

The informality and illegality of this water system places the Korail consumers at a disadvantage, putting a disproportionate burden on women. There is nowhere for water users to voice complaints

or concerns: "If there is a problem with supply or dirty water, complain to whom? We live here illegally." Contamination from leaky pipes and the health consequences that ensue are well known: "Dirty water comes inside pipes due to leakage. We are attacked by various diseases like diarrhea, 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 for consumption increases the costs of water tremendously: "We have scarcity of drinking water. We live with the hope that we will get more water. We drink water after boiling it. The price of firewood is high though."



Woman collecting water from cut pipes in Korail

Photo: Farhana Sultana

An additional aspect of gendered access to water is related to cleanliness; men can bathe in Gulshan Lake or other public water points, but women cannot. They are constrained by domestic responsibilities in the slum and socially appropriate feminine behaviour prohibits bathing in public spaces. Women in Korail stated that they often have to go without bathing or have insufficient water for sanitation, an added suffering in a culture that places importance not only in personal hygiene and cleanliness but also values water for religious ablution and spiritual purification. This is a gendered struggle particularly in hot summer months when water shortages affect the entire city and Korail gets no water for days on end.

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. 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. While men also worry about water, they are not primarily responsible for its provisioning for their families. Women are tasked with obtaining water every day, however difficult it may be. 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" (FGD 2). Women's identities are wrapped up with their abilities to provide sufficient quantities of good quality water for their families (Sultana 2009a). Water scarcity thus has significant gendered meanings, as women repeatedly mentioned their challenges to fulfill familial roles, which are linked to problems of access, quality, timing or fetching hassles including carrying heavy water pitchers and negotiating with neighbours. The perpetual insufficiency of water intensifies struggle and toil in the everyday lives of women, resulting in recurring sickness, limited educational and employment attainment, and stagnant social mobility. The costs associated with these outcomes constitute a tax on women's time and labour and reflect a systematic disregard for the life and health of the slum population (Crow and McPike 2009; Hanchette et al 2003).

Knowing and understanding these struggles and inequalities helps explain preferences for municipal water, which will be further explained below. Indeed, the majority of women surveyed in Korail preferred public water because municipal systems are understood as more likely to attenuate women's struggles. The reliability, cost efficiency and equity gains attributed to public systems have the potential to buffer the hard realities that women face individually and collectively, and are thus regarded as better suited to meet the needs of all users including those left out by private schemes.

Since there is no official participation of women in water supply systems or decision-making beyond small-scale NGO projects, some Korail residents think involving women would make the service more equitable: "If women participate in a committee for water supply, then benefits would be more. We complain to men and there is no result or resolution of the problem, but if women receive complaints then they will give it more importance and it will be resolved sooner" (FGD 2). This vision may essentialize women's nurturing propensities, however, and fail to address power relations within the household and outside where class inequalities may disrupt such an idealization of equitable water distribution. Nonetheless, given the gendered burden of water, a majority of respondents thought women might do a better job:

With men, women also can be involved in water projects if we have them. This will be more helpful as women listen and understand the water problems in the household. Women's awareness will also be increased. Women can play a vital role to solve water problems along with the men if they are given the opportunity. (FGD 2)

While a clear majority expressed such sentiments, there were several men and some women who were firmly against women taking any decisional role. Their perspective is influenced by broader patriarchal beliefs that a woman's place is in the home and not in public spaces of decision-making

and discussion (Sultana 2009b). There is also a claim by some that women are more prone to arguing and ‘squabbling’, and thus would not efficiently resolve disputes. Such opinions are often driven by negative perceptions of women in leadership or decision-making roles.

Where gender and class meet

An understanding of the gender-based inequalities in access, use and decision-making around water is necessary, but not sufficient for developing equitable and accountable alternative systems. Looking at sex and gender gives us but a small slice of the unequal social relations that mediate gender-water relations; too often, inequalities among women are overlooked in initiatives promoting women’s rights and interests. In particular, class-based inequalities among women have undermined a number of efforts to provide access to clean water or empower women to participate in community decision-making. The power relations and social hierarchies that exist among women materialize in ways that silence poor women and allow wealthier women to assert their interests as representing those of the whole.

The intersectionality of gender and class was thus captured in this research; it poignantly demonstrates the difference that social status can make in urban water politics. This approach is all the more important in Dhaka where the disparity in wealth is brought into sharp relief between high-rise apartment areas and the slums that grow in their shadows. The ostentatious visual display of inequality is jarring, but barely scratches the surface of inequalities. Although patriarchal norms affect women across class boundaries, wealthier women do not have to worry about water in the same way as poorer women do. This is noted in the following response: “Women of Gulshan/Banani get water as much as they want. They just open the tap and get water. We have to collect very early in the morning so we have to wake up before the morning prayers” (FGD 2).



Korail slum and surrounding wealthy neighbourhoods, both expanding onto Gulshan Lake

Photo: Farhana Sultana

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 struggle for, and rarely obtain, an adequate supply of water to meet their daily needs. Such grotesque water inequalities are not lost on the women and men who live in the slum, as one man 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." Clearly the gendered division of labour in managing domestic water is not the same across class strata. In addition to the physical labour costs, we need to be attentive to the emotional workload that goes into managing daily water insecurities and frequent water shortages. The challenges associated with procuring water are often humiliating, demoralizing, and many times they result in additional labour costs as part of an exchange, where women provide free labour (e.g. cleaning, sweeping, etc.) to obtain some water. There is a psychological and emotional toll paid by the women in Korail that contributes to a shared desire for a collective response to the water situation (see Sultana 2011).

Even if middle and upper class neighbourhoods have access to municipal water supplies, they too have to deal with issues of water quality and safety because of the poor state of water pipes and water shortages across the city. But if bad water quality confronts all, the differences between legal and illegal forms of access prevent cross-class solidarity. The wealthy view themselves as entitled to clean water because they are paying customers while the poor are undeserving of services because they are illegal squatters. The divide is further sharpened by the rights afforded to the wealthy classes as legal citizens and paying consumers who can complain to DWASA. The poor have no recourse when water is contaminated or supply is lacking. Thus, needs and perspectives across classes are different, and there is no broad alliance for water justice in sight.

An intersectional analysis of gender and class raises broader questions about gender and citizenship. Poor women's inability to obtain water for health and hygiene places them in a position that compromises their health and wellbeing compared to the women of 'formal' neighbourhoods where water is regularly available. This tension exists in tandem with a goal of modernization and economic growth that warrants virtually stripping slums residents of their citizenship rights because they tarnish the façade of wealth and progress that is cultivated in a rapidly modernizing city. The irony, of course, is that it is the poorer labouring class that facilitates the development of Dhaka and attends to the needs of wealthy families.

For the women and men in the Korail slum, the struggle for access to clean water is a politicizing and mobilizing force through which women have developed a sense of agency and identified strategic interests. Their words, their needs, their struggles as well as 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 basic needs, notably water. The preference for municipal

water is imbued by the tensions associated with access, gender and citizenship. For the majority of women in Korail, municipal access is a key factor in mediating those tensions.

Public-private complexities

In the Korail context, public and private service can be a murky, misunderstood or 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, that blur the lines because they operate public systems that are funded by the private sector or development agencies. The fact that DWASA continues to undergo a process of corporatization – the integration of private regulatory processes, commercialized cost accounting and collection procedures – rather than fully privatized as is happening in other municipalities around the world (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. Despite the fact that most respondents lacked first-hand experience with a clear-cut public or private system of provision that would allow them to compare, a broad consensus emerged: the majority of people surveyed argued strongly in favour of DWASA as a public service provider versus a hypothetical private system. While DWASA is facing increasing commercialization, it is still a public utility, and people want it to provide water as a public good.

Preferences for public water

What are the beliefs, assumptions, goals and commitments that support the broadly held preference for public services in Korail? Several factors seem to be at play. 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, which would lift the daily burden of water collection, would allow them to pursue new social and economic activities. In addition to the issues of costs and equity, access to municipal water was often equated with gaining some modicum of citizenship rights. As noted earlier, in Dhaka politics the Korail slum dwellers are treated as illegal squatters on prime real estate. The entanglement of class and citizenship around water issues means harsher toil and labour 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. Finally, access to municipal water is 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.

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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 make 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 – sufferings from lack of water. While the demand for public water was nearly universal in Korail, more women than men valued public water. A small number of men were fine with existing informal arrangements or desired private water, possibly because they do not have the same material experiences with daily lack of water as women do in Korail.

Affordable, quality public water

The vast majority of respondents cited affordability as one of the main reasons for their preference for public water, but still insisted on its ‘good quality’ and ‘safety’. This reflects continued health and safety concerns with DWASA’s municipal water supplies throughout the city. While some felt that private water could be cleaner and safer, they noted that its cost would likely be prohibitive compared to DWASA’s subsidized rates. The current costs for water from private vendors far exceed those of municipal water, and the extra cost of boiling to render it drinkable makes it a very expensive necessity. Payments vary across households, but they prove particularly high for female-headed households and for poorer households. For women, access to a municipal system would reduce time and labour expenditures significantly. Women repeatedly mentioned that they manage the effects of scarce and contaminated water supply with major opportunity costs for themselves but also for their children, households and communities. Korail residents would rather pay for reliable municipal access to open up opportunities for personal and community growth, than have to cope with the current irregular and illegal water system.

The desire to be connected to DWASA water was almost universal, as captured in this collective comment: “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 WASA” (FGD 2). The willingness to pay for access to public water supply also highlights the desire to be seen as responsible, reliable and equal individuals. 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” (FGD 1). As long as people from Korail have the means to pay for water at the DWASA subsidized rates, they would rather send this message of autonomy.

However, this does not signify an endorsement of commodification; it represents an eagerness to obtain the same benefits as other Dhaka citizens. In other words, respondents did not envision belonging and citizenship as part of a neoliberal project that equates citizens with consumers and predicates citizenship on an ability to pay, but echoed broader concerns with the prejudices they face as perceived freeloaders in a society that views slums in a harsh light (see Jones 2011). This is why slum residents declare that they want to engage in the system as consumers, even if it is with token amounts in highly-subsidized schemes. The politics of place that shape the struggle for access to water are strongly influenced by class-based tensions and there are no discernible political rewards associated with free access, only great political costs. Knowing all too well how they are regarded, Korail residents want to become bill-paying citizens like their wealthy neighbours. If cross-subsidization of low-income communities is theoretically possible, and is occurring in some slums in the city under donor-funded initiatives at DWASA, it is politically improbable in Korail given its valuable location in the city, large size, and concerns by the powerful that institutionalizing infrastructure would encourage permanency of the slum.

Citizenship, legality and water justice

The political tensions surrounding access to water are grounded in larger struggles over citizenship and legality (see Castro 2004). As explained earlier, in the case of Korail as in other slums in Dhaka, the denial of access to municipal water is perceived as an implicit denial of citizenship. Thus the desire for access to water reflects the hope to be granted permanency and legality as residents of the city and to gain symbolic recognition in policy and law. The denial of access and the need for water culminate in social and political marginalization, which, in turn, exacerbate unequal perceptions and treatment by the wealthier class. As one woman stated: "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." Government authorities for their part view the slum residents as lost profit potential but fear the political ramifications of permitting permanent access to the municipal water supply.

The majority of respondents in Korail prefer public water because it would acknowledge them as citizens of the city. At the same time because of the enormous and regular costs of obtaining water through private water vendors, some respondents feel that their obligations are 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 whereby private vendors are illegally profiting from stealing water from public water systems; simultaneously, this interpretation is also a defensive posture that is critical of the exploitative nature of the water vendors who are seemingly absolved of their responsibility to render a service paid in full.

From a government standpoint, DWASA officials interviewed noted the complexities and challenges of managing an escalating demand for water by urban citizens in formal and informal settlements. They said DWASA wants to provide water to the slums and legalize water lines with meters and formal payment schemes. There is a fiscal motivation driving this position; the illegal supply for

Korail represents a significant loss of revenue for DWASA, which unwillingly is the source of the water sold by illegal water vendors but obtains no financial benefits from such a system. There are also health concerns associated with illegal access points; they are not regulated or monitored by official entities and become contamination sites that jeopardize the health and safety of the water infrastructure system as a whole. In sum, extending water coverage would simultaneously address public health concerns and boost revenue collection efforts for DWASA.

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 CBOs. Under this scheme, leading Bangladesh NGO Dushtha Shasthya Kendra (DSK) worked to assist Korail residents in their efforts to gain formal access through communal water points and water pipes that would connect to the existing municipal system (Ahmed and Terry 2003). In 2010, after years of joint effort with residents, DSK helped Korail negotiate the installation of a DWASA pipeline in the slum. Although the infrastructure to carry water is now in place, the political will necessary to make the water flow remains absent. Considerable resistance from a range of groups – illegal water vendors and lower-level DWASA officials working with them, political opportunists, nearby wealthy communities – ultimately blocked DSK's and the CBOs' efforts to implement a formal and legal water system in Korail. This failed attempt further entrenched the sense that people in the slum are not regarded as equal citizens. Korail residents also denounce the lack of political will to hear the plight of the poor in the politics of water: "We vote for government for our betterment, but they do not help us." The prioritization of wealthy residents when it comes to water supply illustrates once again how their full citizenship status gives the rich the right to make demands to the state, a right routinely denied to the people of Korail. The continued lack of water has intensified the belief that the state actually cares very little for the slum inhabitants.

Well beyond solely expressing frustrations, 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 envision would prioritize affordability, sustainability, and would take the form of a legal and formalized public water system. However, they recognize that a formal system requires large infrastructure work, networks of pipes and meters, which bear costs too high for slum residents. The majority of respondents think institutional support from DWASA would be essential.

"The alternative they envision would prioritize affordability, sustainability, and would take the form of a legal and formalized public water system."

The preference for public access was accompanied by a vision of water for all. When asked what his ideal system would look like, an older man responded: "If I get the opportunity in decision making...I would ensure equal provision of water for all." Similarly, another respondent notes: "To give

advantage for all I am ready to take any positive decision.” One woman’s response is even more pointed: “I will get involved for the benefit of all and look after the problems of others.” These and other statements reflect a concern for ensuring equitable access. Respondents generally noted that the slum community must come together to press for change. As one woman noted: “If all of us don’t help to create the system, then how can we manage water for our area?” This response furthers the community ethic defended by the majority of respondents and suggests that only through collective efforts could the community maintain a water system. Collective endeavour thus becomes necessary to manage a system as much as it is to press for a formalized service in the first place.

Conclusions

A ‘women and politics of place’ framework broadens the analytical lens to include an understanding of how places and struggles are shaped by forces that may seem out of the scope of water policy. In this study, we find that while it is undeniable that water is critical for life, the demand for access is not solely a representation of need; it is simultaneously a struggle for recognition and citizenship. In the context of Bangladesh’s modernization and economic development, the urban poor are displaced internal and rural migrants whose labour is critical to the infrastructure of a growing city such as Dhaka. Though indispensable to city life, the people in Korail slum are disregarded and their rights are routinely ignored and denied. Access to water is a daily reminder of this reality and thus becomes a battleground for realizing those rights.

While all Korail 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. In Korail and the surrounding areas, 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 to illegality and water scarcity. Such class inequalities in access to water 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 with. Looking at gender and class inequities then 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? These costs are all gendered and contextual, as patriarchal norms influence people’s sense of self and what they can accomplish. 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 water is accessed and managed. Thus, there is a need to further open up the 'black box' of household and community, while avoiding the pitfall of idealizing community participation (see Sultana 2009b). Exploring gendered inclusions and exclusions is important to ensure that collectivizing efforts will bear fruit for all.

Water justice was a common theme throughout this study. People's desire to have public water is not just for life and survival, but also about exercising rights and redressing injustices in the urban fabric that are reinforced by inequitable water provision. Claiming water is thus a way to claim full citizenship status. The overwhelming majority of Korail respondents wanted public water provision via DWASA that would be equitably distributed throughout the slum. They want their current water crises resolved through formal means and want to put an end to the uncertainties and illegalities they are forced to live with. The everyday problems linked to water that is insufficient, poor quality and only sporadically available have knock-on effects on other aspects of life, such as health, employment opportunities, children's ability to attend school, etc. 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. The wider social implications of water scarcity have to be heeded as they affect overall urban and human development.

Finally, the informality and illegality of water supply in Korail calls for a flexible and place-based understanding of service delivery. While there are typologies that capture private, public and non-profit institutional arrangements, the illegal delivery of water by Korail vendors does not fit nicely in any of these. The daily struggles and gendered inequalities are, in part, a consequence of this informality and illegality of water supply, complicating our understandings of private-public debates and showing that these informal arrangements influence preferences for different systems of delivery. How such context-based arrangements are negotiated, implemented or circumvented, and the ways in which gender comes to matter in the everyday lives and on-the-ground realities, are important avenues of further research.

Given the growing international interest in alternatives to privatization, we believe 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 or private water. Attention to gender, experience and place is crucial to any conceptualization of public service and water justice. Scaling up this pilot study to other sites for comparative analyses thus offers fruitful research opportunities to gain more nuanced understandings of global water provision crises as well as to address broader concerns of gender and water justice.

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