Access to Drinking Water and the Empowerment of Women in the Southwest Coast of Bangladesh: Intersections of Gender, Class, and Space

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INTRODUCTION

As she walks from her home in Kochukhali to a community pump in Jelekhali village, Khadija Rahman wraps her ghunta around her head, carrying an aluminum pot she received as a wedding gift on her hip (Bagri 2017). If the pump is dried out, she must buy water from local entrepreneurs with the money her husband sends from the city or with money borrowed from neighbors. Like many other households in the southwest coast of Bangladesh, Khadija’s natural sources of drinking water, including groundwater and fresh-water ponds, have become increasingly saline and dangerous to drink. Her story, covered by Indian journalist Neha Thirani Bagri, also involves fear of leaving domestic spaces to seek economic opportunity or to take her son, who is often ill due to exposure to contaminated water, to the doctor without a male escort (Bagri 2017). While Khadija’s story is certainly not the only female narrative in coastal Bangladesh, her gendered relationship to water opens a complex conversation on women’s access to drinking water and the role of this access in women’s empowerment and powerlessness.

Women like Khadija are not seen as autonomous individuals by the people in their community; rather, they are perceived by their relationship to male figures (i.e. as dutiful mothers, daughters, and wives). This is evident when women are introduced as “the mother/daughter/wife of…” in conversation instead of being referred to as their own person. The role of women in society is restricted to domestic spaces due to patriarchal sociocultural norms, and they are often stripped of their right to education, to political participation, to economic autonomy, and to mobility. Fetching water from these tubewells is seen as women’s work because of the association of water with the physical space of the home (i.e., cleaning, cooking, and pouring water or cha (tea) for family members). The right to water is integral to survival and this right can be stripped away due to structural inequalities driven by gender and economic status. Understanding the complexities of rural women’s lives in relation to water in a region highly vulnerable to climate change can reveal how gender, class, and space impact their treatment, agency, and susceptibility to harm from environmental issues and exposure. Thus, as a step towards environmental and social justice, it’s crucial to consider how women in the southwest coast of Bangladesh might attain power, or, in other words, how empowerment is defined in relation to water.

Professor Shahnaj Parveen conducted a study on gender awareness and social status of rural women in Bangladesh in 2007 through interviews and group discussions with villagers, understanding empowerment to be both “an extrinsic control over resources (human, financial, intellectual)” and “a growing intrinsic capability seen through greater self-confidence and an inner transformation of women’s consciousness” (Parveen 2007, 255). “Extrinsic control” in the context of water can be control over water supply, connections with the community, and economic opportunity. Empowerment begins with “intrinsic capability,” as one must be aware of their own self-worth and feel in control of their own bodies and minds to be conscious of external barriers to their equality (Parveen 2007, 255). The experiences of empowerment and powerlessness in relation to drinking water are not the same for all rural women in the southwest coast of Bangladesh; power over the body, mobility, decisions, and finances depend on intersections of gender, class, and space.

BACKGROUND: THE GEOGRAPHY AND POLITICS OF THE SOUTHWEST COAST OF BANGLADESH

Khadija’s village Kochukhali is on the southwest coast of Bangladesh, which lies at the edge of the Ganges delta. It is very low-lying...
land and thus one of the most vulnerable areas to the effects of climate change. A 2018 study conducted by M.A. Rahman and M.N. Islam mapped 349 households and nearby water sources to explain the scarcity of water in this region, noting high cases of arsenic and saline contamination. The level of salinity in coastal areas is determined by the “balance between upstream freshwater flow and salt water from the sea” (Mahmuduzzaman et al. 2014). Considering this, Rahman and Islam attribute the high magnitude of saline intrusion to the over withdrawal of water upstream due to barrages and to the rising waters of the Bay of Bengal, which leads to tidal flooding (Rahman and Islam 2018). They recognize that the lack of strong protective infrastructure leads to more risk when disasters (i.e., cyclones, storms, and floods) hit and that the lack of a piped water system forces reliance on contaminated groundwater, rivers, ponds, and tubewells (Rahman and Islam 2018).

Moreover, the lack of a strong local government contributes to the failure to maintain infrastructure and regulate water supply. Water management was gradually decentralized in the 1990s due to “participation and community driven projects become[ing] mainstream in the donor community” (Buisson, Naz, and Curnow 2017, 30). Consequently, the Bangladesh National Water Policy in 1999 sought to emphasize participatory water management, establishing that “communities are the main stakeholders” in the water crisis (Buisson, Naz, and Curnow 2017, 30). The policy gave community based and water management organizations (WMOs) “full responsibility” to “lead operations and maintain water infrastructure” (Buisson, Naz, and Curnow 2017, 30). This transition of power over water supply is evident in the majority of tubewells being privately owned, installed in the bari (home), schools, mosques, the market, etc. Groundwater has been made more easily accessible by the implementation of tubewells, and they were initially promoted as perfectly safe water sources. However, high concentrations of carcinogenic arsenic occur naturally under the ground and poison the water, especially if the tubewell is dug too shallow as most are, especially in poor households.

Despite the evident role of class in access to safe tubewells, Anthony Acciavatti describes the tubewell as “the great liberator of the topographic surface and symbol of economic liberalization” in his essay “Biography of the Tubewell” (Acciavatti 2017, 207). He emphasizes its role in decentralizing the control of water and thus empowering the people. Specifically, he explains that the tubewell is the “antithesis of a monument,” allowing people to become “owners and custodians of their destinies” (Acciavatti 2017, 207). However, it’s necessary to ponder the limitations to this empowering experience of liberation, especially considering Acciavatti’s lack of input from rural farmers, and more importantly rural women, who are the main keepers of water. A shift from a centralized water source to an independent tubewell does not succeed in empowering the people solely by putting the responsibility for water access in their hands, as is the same case with the shift from governmental management to community management. In their report “The Gender Gap between Water Management and Water Users: Evidence from Southwest Bangladesh”, Marie-Charlotte Buisson, Jayne Curnow, and Farhat Naz argue that without the government taking action to improve water quality and access in response to users’ concerns, their emphasis on the power of participation seems like merely a symbolic effort (Buisson, Naz, and Curnow 2017).

Women are dependent on getting access to water, and thus it is mainly their lives that are affected by the shifts from governmental to community management; their understanding of empowerment and powerlessness must be considered.

**POWER OVER THE BODY: THE GHUMTA AND THE WOMB**

Since women are the main accessors and users of water, their bodies are the most physically affected by it. Unlike physical beatings and assault, this bodily harm is inflicted by the water itself: disfigurement when carrying water pots on hips which causes complications during pregnancy, higher rates of preeclampsia and hypertension during pregnancy due to drinking water salinity, swollen arms and legs due to drinking water salinity, and lower fetal birth weight and fetal malformation due to arsenic (Sultana 2009; Khan et al. 2011; Kile et al. 2016). The cycle of physical hardship continues with fetal malformation, as women are given the full responsibility of taking care of the babies. Furthermore, as will be consistently seen in the issue of water, gender and class cannot be separated. Wealthier women are more protected from physical hardship as their families can afford to hire others to fetch water, and usually do so due to fear of allowing women to leave domestic spaces (Sultana 2009, 434).

To expand on the intersection of gender and space, when a woman leaves the space of the bari (home) to fetch water, it is custom for her to wear the ghumta to veil her head and body, especially when around men. Dr. Farhana Sultana, who conducted fieldwork and interviews on the arsenic contamination of drinking water in 18 villages in southwest Bangladesh, explains that a woman would be “less subject to punishment” with a ghumta in a public space than without it. She brings up the concepts of “ijjat (honor)” and “lajja/sharam (shame)” that police a woman’s “dress code,” similar to the notions of “pardah (veiling, seclusion)” (Sultana 2009, 431). Pardah is practiced in certain Muslim societies, where a woman must create a physical divide between herself and men, whether it is through an end of a sari held up to one’s face or a physical wall between rooms. The difference between the veiling and physical separation is that the former involves policing of one’s own self and one’s own body to make oneself “invisible” to the male gaze. Sultana emphasizes this difference by recognizing that “the body becomes the site of social control”, with women keeping one hand free to constantly pull back the ghumta as they struggle to hold the pot of water with the other (Sultana 2009, 433). In this way, concepts of ijjat and lajja directly govern and hold power over women’s bodies in relation to accessing water.

The poet Sunil Gangopadhyay corroborates Sultana’s understanding of gendered bodies and visibility in his poem “Woman” in 1989. Firstly, the limitations of Gangopadhyay’s male perspective in this issue must be conceded, as he can’t truly understand the female...
bodily experience. Gangopādhyāy uses imagery related to water to discuss the stereotypes and reduction of women to “instrumental being[s],” by criticizing the alternative common use of this imagery to diminish women to the “desired female lover” (i.e., through comparisons of deep water to a womb and the sexualization of nature) (qtd. in Knotkova-Capkova 2006). His poetry criticizes how “the very concept of female identity...is disappearing in the womb of water,” arguing that a woman is only seen as visible when her body is visible, rather than seeing her for her identity as a person (qtd. in Knotkova-Capkova 2006). His separation of “the womb” and “the woman” can be interpreted to both criticize the perception of women as solely child bearers/sex objects and to highlight the lack of woman’s control over their bodies. Both men and women in rural spaces of Bangladesh understand women’s bodies as promiscuous and hypersexual when not covered. Beatings and sexual assault are normalized in Bangladesh, with an estimated 47 percent of women suffering from different types of assault (Parveen 2007, 254). Women are well aware of the dangers of retrieving water without their ghumta when they are out of the domestic space, and internalize the sexualization of their bodies, diminishing their sense of their own power (Parveen 2007). They are less likely to seek legal help because they are shunned and shamed by both themselves and the people in the community for failing to cover themselves in spaces that don’t belong to them.

Both Sultana’s and Gangopādhyāy’s work serve to highlight a woman’s powerlessness over her own body in relation to water access, with Sultana focusing on the ghumta as a form of social control and Gangopādhyāy focusing on the womb. However, Sultana again notes the intersectionality of gender and class in the ghumta issue, with mainly wealthier and middle-class households having to police their bodies as such, as poorer women must “often have to work in physical labor in public places and are less subject to social regulation of their attire” (Sultana 2009, 433).

The integration of concepts of ijat, lajja, and purdah into women’s daily lives cause them to internalize and justify their lack of power over their bodies, thus lacking “intrinsic capability.” Sultana points out that gender power relations “come to be embedded in bodies,” bringing up the aforementioned physical hardship and pain women experience when carrying heavy pots of water and walking great lengths to access water sources (Sultana 2009, 436). The effects of such hardship and contamination during pregnancy relates to Gangopādhyāy’s separation between the “womb” and women. Referring Parveen’s understanding of empowerment in this context, intrinsic capability would begin with the denormalization of such physical hardships, and the understanding of one’s right to control and protect their own body without fear of lajja. Extrinsic control would be demanding change on a societal level through political and economic autonomy.

POWER OVER MOBILITY: PHYSICAL SPACE AND PHYSICAL DISTANCE TO THE HOUSEHOLD

A theory which contextualizes the current intergroup conflict within Bangladesh, Subah brings up the interpretation and use of “space” to reveal perceptions of relationships between people. Notably, she describes the understanding of “tea bushes as extensions of domestic space, with aging plants in need of familial “care” by women...” (Besky 2013, 89). She understands the dynamic concepts of gardens and plantations to be establishing a physical divide between laborers, who are mainly female, and the person of industry. This use of space serves to symbolize the limitations of female laborers’ power over their mobility and agency outside of domestic spaces, and parallels the use of space in the southwest coast of Bangladesh. As mentioned before, in rural Bangladesh, women are limited to domestic spaces due to patriarchal sociocultural norms; however, since drinking water is associated with domestic, gendered duties, this space expands and intersects public space (i.e. mosques, schools, other houses, and other public spaces with accessible water).

From her conversations with the villagers in the southwest coast of Bangladesh, Sultana found that “some younger women used the daily necessity to fetch safe water from farther places as a way to get out of the confines of the bari and to socialize,” thus “manipulating power relations to increase mobility” (Sultana 2009, 433). One development project worker stated “[p]ani ante prem kore jay,” which translates to “they [the women] go to have an affair while fetching water” (Sultana 2009, 433). His words reflect societal perceptions of females occupying public spaces in rural Bangladesh, understanding their presence as evidence of their promiscuity and lack of lajja (shame). However, rather than bringing them shame, this “affair” can allow women to increase both their self and gender awareness by physically removing them from the overwatch of the bari and so, in a way, removing them from the societal constraints in domestic areas. This allows them to express themselves more freely.

Parveen emphasizes the importance of “social networks,” “freedom of mobility,” and solidarity with other women in the process of empowerment (Parveen 2007, 255). Physical distance to the household allows Bengali women to explore who they are as individuals separate from the bari, while finding a community and connecting with other women at the tubewell. Acciavatti brings up the understanding of the tubewell as a “social centre of the village, a radio receiving set and adult school,” and it could well be that for women as, like Parveen mentions, the ability to converse and discuss with other women might increase their self-confidence and consciousness about gender relations (Acciavatti 2017, 215; Parveen 2007).

As an example of this, in his book on the relationship between water infrastructure and social belonging, Hydraulic City, Nikhil Anand, to his surprise, found women washing up together outside. Anand asked a female resident, Kamla tai, the reasoning behind the space they used while washing, to which she replied that “[g]iven the size of their homes, washing outside was also a way for women to extend their homes beyond their four walls...they blurred the boundaries between home and public space, effectively claiming the area outside their doors as their own” (Anand 2017, 111). Like the women in rural Bangladesh, these women expanded the space they could occupy with the justification of doing their water chores, allowing themselves to step out of their restricted roles inside the home and feel more liberated. This can be compared to the experience of women in the southwest coast of Bangladesh walking and occupying public spaces that hold tubewells. Anand also describes...
washing as a “social time”, with women “exchang[ing] stories of local events and festivals, the temples they visited, and concerns about their children in school” (Anand 2017, 111).

From my own experiences in Satkhira and Jessore, two districts in southwestern Bangladesh, I remember the Bengali women gossiping about the topics Anand mentions, in addition to laughing about silly things their children had done or complaining about their aching backs and sides. The tubewell served as a space to converse freely with other women, and, through those conversations, understand their own problems more, which were responsibility over children and physical pain. The tubewell serves a similar purpose as an empowerment group by allowing women to express themselves freely and join together to first acknowledge and then address gender inequality.

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POWER OVER DECISIONS: NEGOTIATION INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE HOME

However, this experience of empowerment related to mobility and space does not have the same liberating effect for all women, especially for older women who may not have the same physical capability to walk great distances to water sources. Drinking water must generally be collected from another village; in Rahman’s and Islam’s study, only 5.16% of the households had access inside of their homestead and 34.95% had to walk more than 500 meters to the nearest source (Rahman and Islam 2018, 21). Moreover, wealthier women also tend to be more restricted within the bari, as wealthier households “have the luxury” to prioritize ijjat (honor) over survival since they can hire others to get water for them (Sultana 2009, 432).

Women who can’t use physical distance from the house as experiences of empowerment instead increase their agency through bargaining and negotiating within the home. Sultana explains that “conventional gender roles are also reworked...in landscapes of water scarcity,” as some women invoke concepts of ijjat, lajja, and purdah and emphasize their restriction from public spaces to persuade their husbands to install a tubewell in their household (Sultana 2009, 433). This experience of empowerment is more restricted to wealthy women, whose husbands can afford to establish a close water source.

Again referencing Parveen’s definition of empowerment, extrinsic control involves “decision-making autonomy”, “control over resources”, “bargaining power”, and “increased participation in local institutions and political process,” which all stem from the intrinsic capability of having enough “self-confidence” and motivation to speak up (Parveen 2007, 255). Finding the strength to voice one’s perspective and fight for one’s wants and needs is an experience of empowerment that is seen in the example of rich women bargaining for a home water source. This experience is also critical to have outside the home, especially considering that the Bangladesh National Water Policy decentralized power over water management so women’s needs in relation to water are represented by community organizations. If women aren’t vocal within this community, the issue of water access won’t be correctly represented and women will continue to lack power over their bodies, mobility, and economic autonomy.

But Buisson, Naz, and Curnow also emphasize how WMOs “reflect and reproduce gender and class inequalities,” failing to create spaces where women feel their concerns are heard such as by “creating female only sub-committees” or driving direct “change in the status of women in WMOs” (Buisson, Naz, and Curnow 2017, 39). Anand provides an example of such inequalities in water politics by mentioning how although “the settlers’ groups were comfortable with the language of water rights at the NGO meeting...they knew that their councilors did not necessarily see or hear them as the rights-bearing subjects” (Anand 2017, 141). They complain that they need someone who isn’t “as subject to the councilor’s discretionory power” to “articulate their demands,” as the councilors don’t consider their voices as equal to others and thus dismiss their concerns (Anand 2017, 141). This parallels the situation with poor, rural women, who are not seen as equal to men and are thus less likely to be heard. The female members who are active in WMOs are “often from families of the political elite,” and are more likely to be heard because of their class status, but they are not “representative of the majority of female water users” (Buisson, Naz, and Curnow 2017, 36).
POWER OVER FINANCES: MICROCREDIT AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER HOUSEHOLDS

Going back to Acciavatti’s consideration of the tubewell as a “symbol of economic liberation,” it’s necessary to analyze women’s empowerment and powerlessness in relation to the finances of water access. Parveen’s strategies for empowering women includes participation in “widened economic activities”, “control over resources”, and better “income and asset position” (Parveen 2007). In the context of water, women can exercise control over the resource by paying for the water with their own money; power over finances is important as it increases self-confidence and breaks down societal understandings of gender and class limitations.

Water has become a commodity, especially in the summer when many tubewells and ponds are dried up. Professor Ainun Nishat, who works at the Centre for Climate Change and Environmental Research at BRAC University in Bangladesh, stated that in Khadija’s village, Kochukhali, “[e]verybody in the area who can afford it purchases water...About 10 percent of their income goes to buying water” (qtd. in Bagri 2017). Microcredit has been cited as a way to economically liberate women by providing them with opportunity “to become entrepreneurs, as well as [to play] a key role in developing increased social awareness and decision-making capacity” due to their need to spend the credit wisely and repay with interest (Lipi 2016, 231). However, Rahima K. Lipi argues that women are more likely to ask neighbors for money for safe drinking water instead of relying on microcredit, as repayment is more flexible when it’s with a person rather than a bank. In her report “Dignity and Empowerment: An Exploration of the Microcredit Experiences of Women in Rural Bangladesh,” data shows that women who couldn’t repay their microcredit “were discouraged to take [it]...emphasizing that the overriding concern of microcredit providers is protection of the bank’s investment rather than transforming the condition of women” (Lipi 2016, 242). While a 2017 study using household data from Satkhira District, Southwest Bangladesh did find evidence that microcredit could allow short-term security needed in drastic times (ie. money for clean water when cyclones or floods hit), it corroborated Lipi’s findings by arguing that this security costs poor people “longer term prospects for livelihood improvement” (Fenton, Paavola, Tallontire 2017). In other words, the use of credit “leads to a vicious cycle where it is even harder for them [poor households] to adapt because they need to use limited resources to pay off existing debt” (Fenton, Paavola, Tallontire 2017).

Despite the failure of microcredit in female empowerment, the actual act of asking someone else in the community for money or aid, as Khadija did with her neighbors, can be liberating because it dismisses the imposed construct of class and establishes social connections. Sultana brings up the example of when wealthier women must depend on tubewells in a poor family’s household because of the lack of other safe, accessible water sources. She concedes that “some wealthier women were reluctant to get water from there,” but “were forced to overlook such social status infractions to have to depend on the poor in an odd reversal of power relations” (Sultana 2009, 434). Referring back to how low class status and lack of education made poor women insecure and unable to expand their power in political settings, the act of sharing tubewells and financial resources between poor and wealthy households breaks down class-related insecurities. Although some women report feelings of shame when asking to borrow money, others feel they make a stronger, more intimate connection with other women because of the new, established trust (Lipi 2016). As previously mentioned, establishing a strong, female community within the village is critical, as it allows a space for female expression and for discussion on gender awareness.

CONCLUSION

After considering the experiences of empowerment and powerlessness in relation to the body, space, decisions, and finances, it’s apparent that increasing the power of women in relation to water is complex. Intersections of gender, class, and the space a woman is occupying affect their understanding of their intrinsic capability and extrinsic control. Moreover, it’s critical to remember that empowerment is a process, not simply a list of legislation that defines men and women as equal. In other words, gender and class hierarchy cannot simply be broken down by laws establishing women’s control over their bodies, space, decisions, and finances. This is seen by the example of the establishment of a quota to ensure adequate female participation in WMOs; clearly, simply writing down that men and women should be equal in the domain of water isn’t sufficient. Empowerment must involve working to increase women’s self-confidence, self-value, and emphasizing their right to their bodies, space, decisions, and finances through education, women’s advocacy groups, and a political voice.

“...empowerment is a process, not simply a list of legislation that defines men and women as equal.”

When my family and I visited gram (the rural countryside) in Bangladesh, my mother filled our luggage with water bottles because of her fear of the drinking water. Water is equivalent to life, and seeing my mother bring in water to gram, I wondered what the issue was with the sources of life there. Everyone, including the rural women living along the southwest coast of Bangladesh, has a right to water, and water justice cannot be achieved without the voices of these women. Water justice cannot be achieved without the voices of those who carry aluminum pots back and forth from tubewells. Water justice cannot be achieved without a woman named Khadija Rahman, who wraps her ghunta around her head as she walks from her home in Kochukhali to a community pump in Jelekhali village.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


