

**Women, Water Policy, and Reform:
Global Discourses and Local Realities in Zimbabwe**

by

Michael Madison Walker
Department of Anthropology
Michigan State University

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Abstract

This paper examines global debates over water reform and evaluates how reforms may impact women. Water management is perceived as a critical aspect of economic development and human well-being by development organizations and the donor community. As a result, donors and policy makers are active in shaping how water reforms should be conceptualized and implemented. Zimbabwe and several other countries in Southern Africa are in the process of reforming how water is managed. The impetus for reform derives from highly variable rainfall patterns in the region, a historical legacy of inequality in access to land and water resources and the influence of development organizations involved in shaping countries' economies. However, when compared to the 1980s, women are no longer seen as critical to water management by donor agencies. This paper will critically examine contemporary water policy documents and guiding papers to understand how women as water users are being portrayed by development organizations involved in water reform initiatives, what affects policy proposals may have on women's access to and use of water resources, and whether or not these documents adequately allow for women's participation and decision-making in the formation of water policy and water reform.

About the Author

Michael Walker is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Michigan State University with a specialization in Gender, Justice, and Environmental Change. His research focuses on political ecology and water management in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, with an emphasis on informal irrigation practices and wetland cultivation.

Women and International Development

206 International Center, Michigan State University

East Lansing, MI 48824-1035

Phone: 517-353-5040; Fax: 517-432-4845; E-mail: wid@msu.edu

Website: <http://www.wid.msu.edu>

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Introduction

Water scarcity is an increasing global concern due to its importance for maintaining human life, supporting ecosystems, and stimulating economic growth in agriculture and industry. Water resource management features prominently in global debates surrounding development, conservation, and privatization of natural resources. The link between efficient and sustainable water management and economic development garners significant attention in debates over “development” within the donor community. Global discourses on water are being translated into policy recommendations for countries receiving donor aid. This is occurring in Southern Africa, where countries face a dual challenge in managing water resources. First, rainfall patterns are highly variable, resulting in periods of flooding and drought. Second, these climatic conditions are complicated by the historical legacy of colonialism, where most of the productive lands and water were allocated to white settlers thus restricting access for many African farmers. These nations are responding to the global development debates, as well as their own ecological conditions and historical imbalances in access to water through national water reforms designed to decentralize water management, increase stakeholder participation in water management institutions, and create a more efficient and sustainable water sector.

Global discourses on water management are currently centered on how to most effectively deliver water and sanitation services, how the water sector can successfully generate its own funding and decrease reliance on national governments, and how to price water and create markets that reflect the “true” value of water as a scarce economic good while ensuring that all people are guaranteed a right to a minimum amount of water to fulfill their basic needs. These debates have also involved national governments, non-governmental organizations, bilateral and multilateral development organizations, the United Nations, and the European Union in shaping and reforming water management policies. What is striking about water management in the 1990s—when compared to the 1980s—is that women are no longer seen by donor agencies to be central to water management. Today, discussions and policy documents have a tendency to neglect the importance of women as water users and productive farmers, an omission that significantly limits the potential effectiveness of water policy reform (Derman, Ferguson, and Gonese 2000). Moreover, these documents are largely silent on establishing women’s independent water rights, which are believed to enhance women’s well-being and bargaining position, thereby increasing efficiency and productivity in the water sector (Zwarteveen 1997).

This paper will critically examine contemporary water policy documents and guiding papers to understand how women as water users are portrayed by development organizations involved in water reform initiatives, what effects policy proposals may have on women’s access to and use of water resources, and whether or not these documents adequately allow for women’s participation and decision making in the formation of water policy and water reform. I will situate this discussion on water policy reform in the context of Southern Africa, where several nations are currently reforming how water is managed in attempts to address historical inequalities in access to water, as well as making the water sector more sustainable and efficient to better cope with changing climatic conditions. I will pay particular attention to the water reform process in Zimbabwe, which has been ongoing since 1995. I will begin by summarizing global discourses surrounding water reform before examining the implications of particular water reforms for women.

Water: A Right or a Commodity?

Over the last ten years, the policy environment of water resource management has changed. The state's role is no longer seen by the donor community as a provider of water resources, but rather as a facilitator and creator responsible for establishing an enabling environment where other actors provide access to water resources (Cleaver and Elson 1995:3). There is now an emphasis on decentralizing authority over water management and promoting public/private partnerships in operating water infrastructure and delivering water and sanitation services. The guiding principle behind these policy shifts is that water is a scarce commodity and no longer a free public good. This implies a shift from supply management to water demand management, where the market is believed to be the best mechanism for pricing water to reflect its scarcity. Users are required to pay for water services, though some attention has been given by development agencies to providing targeted subsidies to meet the water needs of the poor. Arguments for privatization also suggest the public sector does not have the finances for the investment entailed in water management and that it is also too bureaucratic, inefficient, and corrupt to meet the challenge (Mehta 2003:563).

As the push to privatize water resources has become more prominent, another narrative, drawing on international human rights discourse, seeks to define access to water to meet basic needs as a fundamental human right. This position is supported by both implicit and explicit pre-existing human rights documents already acknowledged by the international community (Gleick 1999). Several covenants and international agreements, such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the InterAmerican Convention of Human Rights, the Declaration on the Right to Development, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the European Convention on Human Rights suggest water is a fundamental resource necessary to guarantee rights to food, human health, and development (Gleick 1999:490). Though access to water is not explicitly mentioned in these documents—with the exception of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child—the right to water is a precondition for achieving any of the rights outlined in these covenants. By recognizing access to water as a fundamental human right, states and governments are obligated to take positive action to ensure its citizens are entitled to and receive a minimum amount of water for drinking, cooking, and domestic use (Gleick 1999; Mehta 2000, 2003).

Though various narratives express how water should be conceptualized, managed, and allocated, most water management documents and policy papers offer a synthesis of access to water as a fundamental human right and water as an economic good. This generally entails liberalizing the water sector and pricing water to reflect its market value while creating targeted subsidies to provide a minimum amount of water to meet the basic needs of the “poor.” This is also a reflection of the principles agreed upon at international conferences concerning environment and development, such as the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development of 1992, Agenda 21 of 1992, and the Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development of 1992. The Dublin principles are particularly important, as numerous water policy documents reference them: water should be seen as a social and economic good; water management should be based on the user pay principle; water management should be decentralized and user based; water should be managed within an integrated framework, drawing a balance between efficiency, insurance of basic needs, and environmentally sound management; and women's central role as water managers and water users should be recognized. “These principles reflect an attempt to balance liberal economic thinking on international development policy voiced by international actors like the IMF and the

World Bank with broader human rights concerns” (Hellum 2001:2). However, according to Mehta (2003:567), powerful actors shaping global water policies tend to reject conceptualizing water as a human right. Accepting water as a human right implies that it is a global public good and not a narrowly defined commodity. Additionally, “water rights” require governments and donor organizations to guarantee a minimum amount of water to meet the basic needs of its citizens.

As the state’s role as a provider of water resources has declined, bilateral and multilateral development organizations have become increasingly influential in water policy and water management. This section will review some of the key provisions the World Bank, the Department for International Development (DFID) in the United Kingdom, and World Water Vision (WWV) are advocating as “efficient and sustainable” water management policies. These organizations were selected because of their importance in formulating and promoting water and development policies. Moreover, their proposals have important implications for women and access to water, which will be elaborated on below.

Conceptualizing Water: Directions for Policy and Reform

Water is valued in multiple ways within international, national, and local discourses, which are drawn upon by various actors to articulate their interests in the water reform process (Derman and Ferguson 2003). In its report, “Addressing the Water Crisis: Healthier and More Productive Lives for Poor People,” DFID proposes alleviating poverty through efficient and sustainable management of water resources. An important component of this strategy is treating water as an economic resource to ensure operational sustainability (DFID 2000:14). This means pricing water to recover the full costs of the service, with the exception of providing transparent targeted public subsidies to meet the water needs of the poor (DFID 2000:15). This report also advocates building strong relationships among public authorities, the private sector, and civil society in order to achieve institutional sustainability (DFID 2000:14).

According to DFID’s position, if water is provided freely it will not be conserved, and users will not maintain water infrastructure or facilities. Therefore, economic incentives must be used to encourage people to invest in the conservation and use of water resources (DFID 2000:32). The state still has an important role to play in protecting its citizens’ rights of access to equal services. In addition to strong public/private partnerships, there must also be strong relations among the central government, lower tiers of the government, and rural administration (DFID 2000:37-8). Despite its emphasis on water as an economic good, DFID also accepts that people may attach religious or cultural values to water, reflecting awareness that it may be valued in other ways (2000:33).

However, water as an economic good is not antithetical to water also being a human right. In the same document, DFID places strong emphasis on human rights and stakeholder involvement, including women, in water management initiatives. DFID stresses the importance of human development and cites the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948), The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) as crucial to protecting the right to life and enjoyment of the highest standards of health (DFID 2000:22). It also recognizes that “gender equality will be essential to achieving the sustainable management of water and sanitation services. The role of women as water resource managers needs to be stressed, and women’s knowledge and experience brought into wider decision-making” (DFID 2000:45).

The report also advocates shifting emphasis from large-scale infrastructure to demand-led, community-focused development (DFID 2000:30). It argues, “experience showed that community-based management achieved more when women’s voices were heard and responded to” and recognizes that power relations play an important role in excluding women and children from water resource development (DFID 2000:31).

WWV (Cosgrove and Rijsberman 2000) attempts to raise global awareness of the water crisis and potential solutions for addressing it. WWV argues all stakeholders must be involved in integrated water management, which is a framework recognizing the links between water, land use, and environment, and that decisions affecting water at the international, national, and local levels are interrelated. The objectives of integrated water management are to empower women, men, and communities to negotiate access to safe water; to produce more food per unit of water applied; and to conserve the quality and quantity of freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems. In order to accomplish these objectives, there must be a shift to allow for the full pricing of water and, because of its scarcity, water must be treated as an economic good (Cosgrove and Rijsberman 2000:2). Like the DFID report, this document also emphasizes women’s involvement in the institutions that manage water, arguing “women’s roles must be reflected in institutional arrangements for developing and managing water resources” (Cosgrove and Rijsberman 2000:3). Women’s involvement in water management is portrayed in terms of their “roles,” and failing to acknowledge or address gender and power relations that mediate women’s access to and use of water and their involvement in water management institutions.

However, regardless of the emphasis placed on stakeholder involvement, WWV implies that water users do not value water. Subsidized services, in particular, encourage users to not value and subsequently waste water (Cosgrove and Rijsberman 2000:6). Thus subsidies obscure the high value of water and do not give users the proper incentives to conserve it (Cosgrove and Rijsberman 2000:19). This argument rests on weak assumptions that economic incentives are the only mechanisms motivating people’s behaviors. Furthermore, this line of argument is often used by numerous actors to promote the “enclosure” of common-pool resources through privatized ownership, which is believed to provide the “proper” incentives for managing and conserving the resource.

In 1993, the Board of the World Bank approved a Water Resources Management Policy Paper (WRMPP) outlining the institutional framework, management instruments, and infrastructure development and operation strategies for water resources. Now ten years later, the “Water Resources Sector Strategy: Strategic Directions for World Bank Engagement” further develops the ideas and practices the World Bank should follow in its involvement with water development and management initiatives. Because water is critical for agricultural development, good health and sanitation, and promoting growth in key industries, water resource management is increasingly important to the World Bank as a means to fulfilling its mission of poverty alleviation.

The water resources strategy document advocates the intensification and increased productivity of water and water infrastructure (World Bank 2003:13). This is to be accomplished by promoting the privatization of urban water supplies and increasing funding for dam construction and inter-basin transfers, which the Bank describes as “high-reward/high-risk water infrastructure” (World Bank 2003). Furthermore, pricing and water rights should be organized with “principled pragmatism.” This entails “ensuring that users take financial and resource costs into account when using water” and realizing that “solutions need to be tailored to specific, widely varying natural, cultural,

economic, and political circumstances” (World Bank 2003:22). The World Bank argues that the positions taken in this paper, as well as the 1993 WRMPP, are consistent with the global consensus that “water resources should be managed holistically and sustainably, respecting subsidiary and ensuring participation, and treating the resource as an economic as well as social good” (World Bank 2003:29). Though water is argued to be an economic as well as a social good, the World Bank’s emphasis on the intensification and increased productivity of water through privatized urban water supplies and increased dam construction suggests the economic value attached to water far outweighs its social significance.

In sum, these four documents together contend that water must be conceptualized as an economic good subject to the laws of the market, while the state plays a role in providing targeted subsidies to disadvantaged groups and creating a context for actors to invest in the water sector. Furthermore, they each advocate broadening stakeholder participation and making efforts that “ensure community participation is based on democratic principles that increase social stability and create conditions for all stakeholders to be ensured fair rights, access to information, and an adequate share in decision making” (Cosgrove and Rijsberman 2000:19). These documents fail to address the centrality of women’s efforts to improve access to portable water and sanitation during the 1980s and fail to recognize women as “productive” users of water. Women are included in the need to broaden participation and involvement in water management, particularly because of their roles in the domestic water sphere, but with the exception of DFID’s report, gender relations are ignored.

Water Reform in Southern Africa

Southern Africa encompasses an area of approximately 6.8 million square kilometers and is inscribed with sixteen major river basins. The majority of the region is characterized as arid or semi-arid, implying that rainfall is highly variable, with most of the rainfall derived from evaporation over the Indian Ocean. Several countries (Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe) have taken steps to reform how water is managed and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) drafted a protocol (The Protocol on Shared Water Courses), outlining guiding principles for fostering cooperation and coordinated management of the region’s shared river basins (SADC 2000). Water will continue to be an important issue in the region as governments, private investors, and development organizations promote their competing visions of sustainable water management under predictions of population increase and growing water scarcity (Chenje and Johnson 1996). The water reform process in Zimbabwe provides an opportunity to examine how gender has been incorporated by the government and donor agencies into the water reform process and what changes to water management will mean for women’s access to and use of water given women’s importance to agriculture and producing food for consumption and to generate income.

Zimbabwe is a water scarce country, where the economy depends on irrigated agriculture, thereby increasing the importance of water management (Derman, Ferguson, and Gonese 2000). In 1995, the Government of Zimbabwe, with donor assistance from the Netherlands, Norway, United Kingdom, and Germany, formed a technical working group to support the water reform process. The result was a Water Resources Management Strategy (WRMS) paper designed to reform how water is managed in the country. This document proposes legislative and institutional changes designed to broaden the funding base for water management and address historical inequalities in access to water resources stemming from the colonial period, when the country’s productive lands and water were appropriated by white settlers. Similar to the other documents mentioned in this

paper, the ongoing reforms in Zimbabwe reflect an attempt to merge neoliberal economic philosophies with concerns of human rights and equal access to water. This reflects the government's dilemma of financing the water sector while ensuring people receive water for basic needs. As Hellum (2001:10) contends, "the right to livelihood in terms of water for basic needs is given high priority in Zimbabwe's new water act."

The new Water Act of 1998 and the Zimbabwe National Water Authority Act now form the legal basis of water management in the country. Prior to the new Water Act, the Water Act of 1976 was the primary legal instrument guiding water management; it stated that water rights were based on a priority date system, meaning that older water rights were given priority over recently acquired ones. Thus in times of water scarcity, farmers with the most recent rights would lose access. Rights were also granted in perpetuity, meaning allocated for life. Under the 1976 law, white commercial farmers received individual water rights while black communal area farmers could not apply for water rights and had to rely on civil servants to do so for them (Derman, Ferguson, and Gonese 2000:11). The new Water Act has abolished the concept of water rights and replaced them with water permits granted on a 20-year basis.

The Water Act of 1976 also granted permit exemptions for polluters and recognized a concept of private water (surface water originating and remaining on one's land) that was often not readily understood by users or administrators. The new Water Act implemented a polluter-pays principal and abolished the concept of private water. All water is now vested in the state and "all Zimbabweans should have access to water as a basic right and stakeholders should be involved in decision making in the development and management of the resource" (WRMS 2001:11).

A central tenet of Zimbabwe's water reform process is the broadening of stakeholder participation through the establishment of Catchment and Subcatchment Councils. These institutions are designed to capture the interests of various water users and incorporate them into a water management plan. Catchment and Subcatchment Council meetings offer a forum for different stakeholders to discuss water related issues. The country is divided into seven catchments (watersheds) based on Zimbabwe's seven major rivers and tributaries.

In addition to focusing on increased stakeholder participation and equal access for all Zimbabweans, the WRMS also calls for a shift to water demand management whereby water is recognized as a finite resource that through time has become increasingly scarce (WRMS 2001:39). Thus water management should be based on market principles requiring the user to pay, while the government should support targeted subsidies to meet the basic needs of disadvantaged groups (WRMS 2001:48).

Another important aspect of Zimbabwe's new Water Act is the division of water into "primary" and "productive" categories. All people have a right to primary water, which is defined as water used for drinking, cooking, irrigating small gardens, washing, and watering livestock. Productive water is defined by use, such as water for commercial farming and livestock, mining, hydroelectric power, etc. However, people's perceptions and actual use of water do not fit within this neat dichotomy. In Zimbabwe's communal lands, women use water simultaneously for both primary and productive purposes through the care and cultivation of vegetable gardens and fields. These gardens typically provide the household with food and a source of cash income, thus blurring the distinction between primary and productive uses of water. This distinction is also blurred by women who use primary water to brew beer and raise small livestock for sale. Furthermore, the categorizing of water into

primary and productive does not address issues such as water quality or quantity, which could have important implications for women, who procure water for both household purposes and commercial activities.

Another aspect of this division of water that has important implications for women is that men are typically associated with “productive” uses of water by agricultural extension workers and donor agencies, and ownership and property rights become a more contested issue when monetary gains are involved (Derman, Ferguson, and Gonese 2000; Cleaver and Elson 1995). Cleaver and Elson (1995:7) argue that “the productive possibilities of domestic water are not easily quantified. There is a danger that the focus will shift dramatically to supplying water where the economic benefits are obvious.” This could restrict women’s access to water in contexts where more visible economic gains are perceived.

Representing Women as Water Users

Women are portrayed in a similar fashion within these five documents. They are identified as domestic water users, highlighting their responsibilities for cooking, washing, and caring for children. The documents also emphasize gender roles, with women’s roles primarily in the domestic sphere, and not gender relations or power relations between women and men, which are articulated through practices, ideas, and representations, including the division of labor. This can be attributed in part to the emphasis women and development approaches placed on constructing separate spheres of water management and highlighting women’s roles.

Feminist approaches to women and development have changed dramatically in their conceptualization of women’s relationships to the development process. Beginning in the 1970s, the Women in Development (WID) approach sought to address issues of poverty and inequality by emphasizing women’s productive roles in agriculture, arguing for women’s participation in development projects as a means of alleviating poverty and empowering women. However, because the focus was on poverty and not oppression, social relations and power structures were under-theorized or taken for granted (Moser 1993; Peet and Hartwick 1999). During the later 1970s, the Gender and Development (GAD) perspective went further in addressing the underlying social, economic, and political structures that perpetuate inequality (Rathgeber 1990), entailing a more concerted examination of gender relations and questioning the sexual division of labor. Despite scholarly recognition of the importance of examining power relations between men and women, development agencies and practitioners have been slow to address these concerns through policy implementation. This is particularly evident in water policy reform, where women are repeatedly characterized by their roles as domestic water users and ignored for their contributions as productive farmers.

In spite of the importance of highlighting women’s work and contributions to water management, these approaches neglected to perceive women as productive farmers and irrigators (Derman, Ferguson, and Gonese 2000; Ferguson 1998; Zwarteveen 1997). Additionally, men and gendered relations are absent from this narrative of roles and responsibilities (Cleaver 1998). For example, in Zimbabwe, female-headed households comprise 60% of rural households (WRMS 2001), but the WRMS paper rarely discusses women as productive farmers (Derman, Ferguson, and Gonese 2000). As a result, women’s contributions to productive agriculture are ignored and their knowledge, expertise, and interests are marginalized in debates over productive agriculture.

Chapter 11 of the document focuses solely on gender and water, advocating a gender approach to water management that entails recognizing the different roles and responsibilities men and women have regarding water management (WRMS 2001:81). Women are the managers of community water resources, as well as responsible for food preparation, washing clothes, and family hygiene. They are also mentioned as being responsible for most agricultural production and having a history of cultivating along wetlands and stream-banks to support their families (WRMS 2001:81). Nonetheless, emphasis is placed on mainstreaming women's participation in water management based on their managing water for domestic use. This notion reflects a larger problem of ignoring women's contributions to all types of production.

WWV also describes women's involvement in water management in terms of gendered tasks and responsibilities. "A gender-specific division of tasks, means, and responsibilities implies that different needs, interests, and experiences of women and men need to be taken into account explicitly in water resource management" (Cosgrove and Rijsberman 2000:19). The World Bank pays even less attention to women's participation in water management, claiming that their analysis of water management is based on the four "Dublin Principles." However, it neglects to address Principle #4 on the salience of women to water management. The document does declare that women can and should play an important role in programs addressing water and sanitation need, but offers no suggestions as to how this Principle can be translated into practice and fails to address women's use of water for food production.

None of the documents mentioned above challenges the gendered division of labor that naturalizes women's responsibility for domestic water needs. Without this critique, women's involvement in productive agriculture will remain invisible. Challenging the naturalization of the gendered division of labor also entails understanding how authority and property relations shape the gendered division of labor and access to natural resources (Carney 1996).

Privatizing Water: Who Benefits?

The documents examined treat water as an economic good. This is often presented on the same page as recognizing water as a human right or concerns about basic needs and subsidies for disadvantaged groups. However, the documents fail to give significant attention to how privatization will affect different actors, particularly women, given their importance in water management. The question is, will privatizing water management broaden access to water or exclude more users from this critical resource? Furthermore, what impact will water privatization have on the quality of water resources that people depend on to sustain their health and livelihoods? These documents and policy positions do not adequately explore these questions, but rather rely on conventional neo-classical economic arguments privileging economic incentives as motivating factors to conserve water—as well as the best means for allocating it efficiently—without examining issues of access and equity under private property regimes.

Water privatization raises a number of important issues regarding women's access to water. The commodification of water has the potential to "erode people's informal rights to free water" (Mehta 2003:565). Informal rights are rules of use and access that are unwritten or implicit, and include cultural norms that define how resources can and should be used. Social networks, such as kinship ties, are often important for gaining access to natural resources in this context (Nemarundwe and Kozanayi 2003). For example, in Zimbabwe's communal areas, women's access to water is often

based on informal rights and rules of access mediated through social and kinship networks. Under Zimbabwe's new Water Act, water for domestic purposes (including food crops) is classified as primary and thus entitled to everyone. Nonetheless, people must negotiate access to water through asymmetrical power relations. Therefore, trends toward privatization and enclosing what were once common-pool resources have potentially serious implications for women and men who rely on informal rights of use and access. What happens in a context where privatization does occur: will water be displaced from use on food crops and steered toward market-oriented cash crops (Zwarteveen 1997:1344)?

Additionally, advocates of privatization as a means of preventing water scarcity and allocating resources tend to ignore power dynamics within rural households, as well as naturalize women's water-related responsibilities and attach low opportunity costs to women's time (Mehta 2003:562). There is an implicit assumption that a husband's access to water will automatically benefit the entire household, instead of treating this as an empirical question. Agarwal (1994) argues that the household represents an arena of both conflict and cooperation where access to resources are continually negotiated and renegotiated. In this arena, bargaining power—the extent to which a person's claims are seen as socially and legally legitimate (Agarwal 1994:54)—becomes essential in understanding how women can challenge the current formal and informal structures that deny them access to land and other natural resources. Thus, water management reforms need to consider the power relations within households and what are often glossed over as “rural communities,” which are often differentiated by wealth, status, and gender when considering issues of water access and equity.

If we examine the outcomes of privatizing land and other property in Africa, the likelihood of the privatization of water benefiting women is unlikely. In general, privatization tends to strengthen the rights of some groups, such as community leaders and household heads, to the detriment of women and other marginalized groups (Lastarria-Cornhiel 1997:1318). For example, in the context of land tenure, shifts from customary tenure arrangements to private property regimes have often further marginalized women's access to land by eroding usufruct rights or informal rights sanctioned by social norms. As land becomes privatized and controlled by a few individuals, others, including women, are now more dependent on the owners of land for gaining access. The individuals with control over land are now in a position to charge rent or negotiate labor arrangements with those seeking to gain access. Women are generally allocated usufruct rights and must rely on social relations with men to gain access (Ibid). In spite of claims that the market is gender neutral, “during the transition from customary tenure to private property systems, women tend to lose the few rights they had under customary tenure and do not gain the rights that, theoretically at least, every person has in a private property and market system” (Ibid:1326). Women are disadvantaged by the market system because they are more likely to have little cash income, little political power, no property, and a family to care for (Ibid).

Shifts to water privatization in West Africa have produced mixed results. Bayliss (2001) examined the outcomes of water privatization in Guinea, Senegal, and Ivory Coast, concluding that privatization has improved the collection of fees by government and lowered tariffs, but high water prices and disrupted services have hit the poorest segments of the population the hardest. In the case of Guinea, the government's influence over the firm managing water remained quite influential in how water pricing was negotiated between the two parties and the willingness of the private company to disconnect water services (Bayliss 2001:8). Though these case studies should not be generalized too broadly, they do reveal some important problems with water privatization. Will the

desire to turn a profit override concerns of equity and allocation of water services to marginalized segments of a population? To what extent will governments be able to regulate and monitor private water investors and the delivery of their services? It is also important to recognize that not all benefits of water can be expressed in quantifiable monetary terms, and thus they risk being undervalued in the market (Zwarteveen 1997:1344).

Decision Making, Participation, and Empowerment

Increasing stakeholder participation in water reform management has received substantial attention. All of the documents reviewed here reinforce this trend by advocating decentralized water management and greater stakeholder involvement. Water reform in Southern Africa also follows this trend. As stated earlier, Zimbabwe has devolved management authority to the country's seven Catchment Councils and in South Africa and Mozambique Water User Associations and Catchment Management Authorities are now responsible for resolving water management issues. Furthermore, development organizations, such as DFID, are advocating building strong relationships among governments, civil society, and private investors. Thus multiple stakeholders, from community-based water management institutions to international development organizations, are now operating in the same arena when it comes to water management, but at different levels and with varying and unequal voices and authority. Cleaver (1998) argues that participation has generally been conceptualized in terms of apolitical user groups, a framing that emphasizes formal structures and cloudy notions of community and culture. How will this affect women's involvement in water management? Do institutions, like Catchment Councils, adequately represent various women's interests and positions? Can they really offer enhanced participation and empowerment if they remain conceptualized as apolitical user groups?

Mainstreaming gender in water management institutions did receive some attention in the documents mentioned above. This involves incorporating women into decision-making processes and giving women the opportunity to fully participate in the discussions over water management. In theory, Zimbabwe's Catchment Councils offer an equal opportunity for catchment residents to participate, but in practice, women face a number of constraints that may limit their participation. Because of their obligations to their families, women are not able to attend meetings and even if they have the time the cost of transportation to and from the meetings may be prohibitive¹. Women also face cultural constraints, such as norms defining appropriate gender roles that discourage them from attending these meetings or speaking out at public meetings. Finally, different stakeholders will embody different levels of status and negotiating power, thus restricting the voices of more marginalized attendees.

Because of the constraints discussed above, there needs to be more consideration of how to implement this notion of gender mainstreaming, whether at local levels of water management or national and international levels of policy formation, into practices that facilitate equal participation of all stakeholders involved. Moreover, as Hellum (2001:4) states, "strategies setting out to make water managers and planners gender aware is a necessary but not sufficient measure. More important is to ensure that the water reform process takes women's rights to participate and own property on an equal basis with men onboard."

Women's water needs should be incorporated at all levels of policy formation and practice in order for water management to be effective and equitable (Zwarteveen 1997:1336). The documents reviewed here, for the most part, suggest this; however, they vary in the extent to which they

actually examine ways to implement women's concerns. None of the documents addresses women's independent water rights or the ability to participate and own property on an equal basis with men. As Zwarteveen (1997:1336) contends, "securing women's rights to water may thus become an increasingly critical entry-point for women's empowerment." Moreover, women's water rights may increase women's bargaining position within the household and enhance their social and political rights².

Women, Differentiation, and Policy Implementation

Throughout the documents and positions reviewed here, as well as within this paper, women have been portrayed as a homogenous group with similar interests, experiences, and power. Yet recognizing differences in women's positionalities is crucial to understanding how women negotiate access to and use of resources such as water. The intersections of class, ethnicity, age, inheritance, and gender are important in shaping women's access to water and other natural resources, as well as in shaping their experiences and interests in the environment (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari 1996:5). Jackson (1993) argues that women's age and class positions, as well as whether or not they reside near relatives or are able to inherit property, help to mediate engagements with the environment and shape how women use resources, how much they use, and their attitudes and beliefs about conservation and sustainability. Furthermore, "inequalities among women exist even at the household level where seniority frequently patterns divisions of labor, access to and control of resources, and decision-making powers" (Jackson 1993:1949).

Recognizing the differences that exist among women in the context of water management is important in assuring that different women have a voice in decision-making and management practices. It is important not to assume that all women are guided by the same interests or possess the same water needs. Women's water needs are shaped by their position in the gendered division of labor, household composition, wealth, ecological conditions, etc. Because women water users are not a homogenous group, water reform policies need to account for these differences (Hellum 2001:7).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to summarize some of the global debates around water policy reform and examine their implications for women's participation and access to water. Global discourses on water management frame this issue in terms of neo-liberal economic thinking within broader concerns of human rights and poverty alleviation. The World Bank, DFID, and WWV conceptualize water as an economic good and are advocating for a demand-management strategy based on market principles, stakeholder involvement, and a reduced role in the water sector for national governments.

The four policy documents, as well as Zimbabwe's WRMS, do include a focus on women as water users and highlight the need to include women in water management decision making and practice. However, I contend they do not adequately address the differentiation of women water users, particularly regarding women as productive farmers. Nor do they address issues of power within households and communities that shape men and women's participation in both informal and formal water management institutions, as well as their access to water resources.

Furthermore, the emphasis on water as an economic good—and thus subject to the rules of the market—will undoubtedly have important implications for women. However, these documents do not address this issue but rather rely on unfounded assumptions about the relationship between

economic incentives and human behavior to justify their positions. Instead, empirical research is necessary on how the commodification of water will affect different users. Specifically, will treating water as an economic good broaden people's access or place new constraints on their abilities to maintain their health and livelihoods?

The attention given to women's participation in water management is necessary but not adequate for ensuring greater equity in access to water resources and decision making. More emphasis needs to be placed on how to translate this discourse on women's participation into practice. As Hellum (2001) argues, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) represents the most important human rights framework for addressing women's access to water and participation in water management. CEDAW obliges governments to take initiatives to eliminate both direct and indirect discrimination. The notion of indirect discrimination includes development policies that appear to be gender-neutral, but in practice disenfranchise women water users in comparison to men (Hellum 2001). If policy makers are sincere about incorporating women into decision-making and policy practice, then human rights frameworks such as CEDAW must be incorporated into policy documents as well as the institutions responsible for managing water to ensure that women's interests and participation are translated into action.

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Notes

1. Mtisi and Nicol (2003) have documented some of the difficulties associated with transportation and costs in attending Catchment Council meetings in Zimbabwe's eastern highlands.
2. Agarwal (1994) makes a similar argument in regards to women's independent land rights as the basis for improving other economic, social, and political rights in addition to decreasing poverty and increasing women's economic resources.

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